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BASS-  
AKWARD

a wrong-way  
romance

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## BASS-ACKWARDS

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The Haul Ash Truck and Trailer rental office in Ashland, Texas, didn't have a neon or LED 'OPEN' sign in the window when Christina Lee Dodd showed up for her closing shift that Thursday, even though it was one o'clock in the afternoon. That was because her boss was too cheap for them to have one.

Instead, there was the cracking plastic one that read 'OPEN' beneath a little clock someone could manually move the hands on, to show the entire dozen customers they might have over the course of a week when an employee would be in the building. The back side said 'CLOSED' and the entire thing was older than dirt.

Christina pulled off the highway, and the tires of her '80 Bronco crunched over the gravel drive and parking area until she pulled up at the side of the squat little manufactured building that was her only place of employment. She cut the engine and shouldered her purse. Looked down at herself and let out a breath.

This was not her normal work attire. Christina was a jeans-and-tee-shirt kind of girl. But not today.

Not today.

She stepped out of the truck—she called it a truck, she didn't care what her cousin Lloyd down in Tyler said—and straightened the gores of the summer dress. The rare specimen in her wardrobe was navy blue and dotted with tiny pink and white flowers. It came with equally tiny sleeves and its hem fell somewhere south of slut but north of schoolteacher. There was a fair amount of the jersey material: it swung and fluttered when she walked.

She and her brown cowgirl boots and long blonde hair, on display like it almost never was, marched their way to the front door. She made her best effort to wipe the grim look off her face and look chipper.

She was trying to charm her boss.

The twined chain of mini cowbells dangling from the inside handle of the door clunked their dull alarm as she pushed her way into the office. Air conditioning blasted her in the face. It was hot already, and only May.

“You’re eight minutes late.”

Ah, there. There was Bill Marshall.

Bill was her boss. And Bill was an asshole.

“Sorry, Bill. Let me just clock in.”

“Mmhm.” He grunted in disapproval. It was pretty much his default response, now that she thought of it.

Haul Ash still had an honest-to-goodness time card punch clock, and for similar reasons as their OPEN sign. Christina pulled her card and did the deed, then slid it back in its slot below the three others there: Jonah, Travis, and of course, Bill.

She came around the front counter in all its faux-marble Formica glory and slid her purse onto the shelf below, the same as she did every day. Bill turned on the tall shop stool where he’d sat in front of the front desk computer and slid off toward the door to the back half.

“I’m gonna make some more coffee.”

“Mkay.”

Christina began shuffling through the printed invoices on the counter and took over the stool, still warm. She made a face.

If he’d noticed a difference in her appearance at all, he hadn’t so much as twitched an eye about it. Sounds of puttering and clacking of kitchenware came from the back half, which was what everyone there called the combination break and storage room of which the rear portion of the building consisted.

The whole floor plan, if you could call it that, was a simple rectangle, divided neatly in half. The front room was allotted to the space where customers came and waited or paid, the back a catchall for everything else, with a smaller bit sectioned off on the west side for a bathroom. There was also a second building in back, a detached aluminum affair where repairs

happened, and it was mostly Travis and Jonah who worked out there, anyway.

Fifteen minutes passed while she busied herself. Thirty minutes. An hour.

She shifted on her seat. She'd heard the back door open and close, which meant Bill had probably gone to the shop and Christina was alone in the office.

At some point, she was going to have to ask him, because at four o'clock he was going to go home. She needed tomorrow off. *Needed*. It was no joke. And Bill Marshall was one hard stick of butter. The man needed softening.

For what had to have been the twentieth time, her eyes flitted down to the probably way-too-obvious dress. She had some cleavage—not much, but some—and it was doing its best to sit up straight and look pretty. Had her mascara wondered what it was doing in the light of day when she'd dug it out from the bag under her sink? There was hardly time for makeup anymore, but today she'd made time. Just a little.

Christina was not ignorant. She knew about the Halo Effect. If a body needed to ask favors, better to do it not looking disheveled and tired. Especially not if you needed them from the owner of Haul Ash Truck and Trailer.

By the time the clock read ten after three, they'd had all of one customer pick-up and two phone calls asking about hours. Bill had returned and put away a box of packing tape, restocking the shelves of the few items they sold rather than rented, and then had gone off again into the back half.

*You need to do this, Christina Lee. Or you're not gonna get a chance.*

She sighed and hopped down from the stool. Pushed through the door to the back.

Her boss stood on a stepladder in the storage side of the room, and had his head periscoped into one of the acoustic tiles of the ceiling. He was fiddling with something out of sight above the shifted tile.

Christina crossed the room to lean against a long folding table that stood along the opposite wall. A wide, horizontal window, banded with aluminum blinds, grinned at her back and lit the room.



He hadn't acknowledged her entry yet, and the knot in her stomach from having to ask for anything made her almost give up and leave. Everyone knew Bill handed out extra time off like the Devil handed out ice water.

"Bill," she said, forcing her own hand.

"Yeah." He was still up to his ears in the ceiling.

"I gotta ask you something."

"What's that?"

He stepped down, replacing the tile and dusting his hands on his jeans. Would it work? Could she sweet-talk Asshole Bill?

"I need to know if I can take tomorrow off."

"Nope."

*Dammit! Just like that?*

"It's really important," she said, "and Travis is gonna be here."

He deposited a pair of red-handled pliers he'd been using on top of the stepladder. "Answer's still no."

Now he was washing his hands in the sink of what counted as their break room. It was really just the west side of the back half, where they had a card table and some folding chairs set up next to a mini fridge.

Christina ground her teeth, her head welling with the consequences of not having the time she needed the next day.

"I've worked here two years and haven't asked for one day off, Bill." So much for sweet talk.

Her boss turned around and eyed her, wiping his hands with a paper towel.

"I don't see what that has to do with the schedule." He regarded her with just a hair of annoyance, and his mouth came open as if he was going to add some other pointed comment, but then shut. Was there the slightest tilt of his head? Was that movement of his eyes him taking some notice of her dress for the first time? Some of her legs, her collarbone on display?

"Please," she said, trying her best to add honey instead of salt. "I'll make it up."

He snorted and tossed the paper towel in the trash. Sauntered in her direction. No. Not 'sauntered'. That would imply some sort of self-aware ego, some cocky show he was putting on, and Bill never put on anything. Either way, in a moment they were closer and, for whatever reason, it made Christina press the backs of her thighs against the table in unconscious retreat.

"You'll make it up?"

Why did it sound like a threat?

Still, she nodded at the sliver of hope. "I will."

"Okay, Christina Lee." His voice was quieter than its usual bark, and it made her insides curl. "You can make it up by bending that pretty little ass over this table for me. Right now. Or you can quit whining and come in tomorrow. And you won't bring this shit up ever again."

Her jaw hung slack.

*Bend over the ...*

Damn! The dress was supposed to paint a picture, not pull audience members up on the stage! Shit!

Bill had hooked thumbs into his belt, one eyebrow up, waiting, while she gaped at him.

Who looked at Asshole Bill that way? The man was, well, not *quite* old enough to be her father, but still. He wasn't in bad shape she supposed, but attractive? Someone to fantasize about? Someone to invite quickies with? Not even.

*But you need tomorrow off. You. Need. It.*

It was three-fifteen in the afternoon for Pete's sake! A customer could come and—

"That's what I thought," he said, turning for the door to the front. *Noo! Fuck!* "You better be here on ti—"

"Okay." His hand stopped on the doorknob. "Bill, okay." Just his head swiveled, and she caught the side of one eye. "I will. I'll do it."

For the briefest of moments, just when he turned back to face her, she thought there was a slackening of his features. Some indication he was as

dumbfounded as she was. But just as quick, it was gone, and his mouth settled into a hard line.

“All right then,” he said, thumbing the lock closed. “Go on.”

Her hands gripped the laminate wood edge of the table behind her. Bill Marshall had no sense of humor at all. He was not joking, not even one little bit.

“Um, okay.” She started to turn. To face the other way. “Okay.”

*Holy fuck are you gonna do this? This is like, every sexual harassment stereotype in the world.*

Christina put her hands on the table. Leaned forward on tentative arms.

“All the way down,” he said from somewhere closer behind her. “Shoulders on the table.”

*Oh shit, oh shit.*

How much higher would her dress come up if she bent over that far? But she went down on her elbows, and then laid the side of her face on the surface like he’d asked.

*You’re worried about what he’s gonna see? You know he doesn’t want to bend you over just to laugh at you. You know what he wants.*

She breathed, her breasts squished up against the wood, and waited. The radio was still on in the front office, and cars shushed past on the highway.

“Reach back and lift up your skirt.” The voice was closer still.

Christina swallowed. She was just supposed to bend over. When had this become some fucked up game of Simon Says?

She reached back, began gathering fabric.

“All the way up. Over your ass.”

The rest of it came. She hiked it to lay over her tailbone and let go, the back door that led outside to the shop horizontal in her line of sight.

Long seconds went by and Bill said nothing. What was he doing back there? Just staring at her underwear?

Then came the touch of a hand.

Christina started. His work boots had made no noise on the floor. Now there were at least two fingertips tracing skin along the panty line at her leg. She hadn't worn anything special. He'd be looking down at underwear that were plain, yellow, serviceable. None of this had been a part of the plan.

"Move your feet apart." He tapped at her ankle with the side of his boot, and she shuffled her soles a little wider on the tiles.

"More."

Another tap, one on each side this time, and with more force. Her feet slipped outward and her weight came onto her belly. She had to look like half a sawhorse at this point, but that was the least of her problems.

A full set of male fingers slid down over her covered mound. Slid and began to massage.

*Dear God, Bill Marshall is touching my pussy.*

Not just touching. *Rubbing*. While she spread her legs in the back half of the fucking office. And the more he worked the pads of his fingers in little circles, the more she felt her body dampen the fabric.

*You are not getting wet right now. There is no fucking way.*

Just when something embarrassing was about to squeak out from between her teeth, the hand disappeared. The sound of a belt buckle replaced it.

Christina began to breathe through her mouth, those low, controlled breaths of a person trying to avoid panic. It was going to happen. She was going to let her boss put his dick in her for a goddamn day off.

Fabric rustled and fingers were back. They were hooking under the waistband, tugging. Her panties stretched over the swell of her ass and wider across her hips. Down he pulled them. Down and down, until they made a tight cotton bridge, strung between the tops of her thighs.

Cool air touched her lips. So did the head of Bill's cock.

*Damn, he doesn't mess around.*

Did she *want* him to mess around? No. Get it over with.

A palm splayed over the small of her back, and he leaned some of his weight while the blunt head—guided by his other hand, no doubt—smeared the moisture between her lips.

*Oh god oh god.*

There was no big announcement. No dramatic sounds or exclamations. Just hot, hard dick as it stopped playing and started pushing its way into her body.

It was both familiar and unfamiliar at once. Cock was cock, more or less, and Christina was no virgin. But this one was new. This place was new. Her boss, who she was just supposed to charm, was now halfway inside her. And who knew he was even interested in the first place?

No. Make that all the way inside, the press of hips and groin cushioned against her ass, his balls—*oh my god!*—warm and kissing her lips.

“There we go,” he said, settling in to the hilt. “Theeere we go.” He pulled out, almost to the tip, and thrust back in, the whole length in one go. She couldn’t help a gasp.

The same pattern happened again: a near total withdrawal, a breath, a swift plunge to the root, and hold. And again.

And again.

Bill Marshall was fucking her. And true to his asshole colors, he was not going to be a gentleman and hurry up about it. He was going to take his time.

She lay with her upper body on the table, legs spread, stretching her panties out, her boss’s work boots keeping her ankles apart while he nailed her with an infuriating deliberation. She didn’t know what to do with her hands. They came up at last to brace near her shoulders, halting the jerk of her body each time so her head wouldn’t bang on the wall.

The table, however, had no such protection and bang-thumped the bottom of the window molding with every metered thrust.

Noises were starting to grind out of her throat. She couldn’t help it. He was thick enough. Long enough. She was maybe stunned by disbelief, but not in terrible distress.

Her body began to respond. Though he never sped or slowed, he slid easier as arousal started to seep.

*You are not turned on by Asshole Bill! There is a warm, hard penis prodding around in your lady parts, and your body is meant to react.*

Thumbs came to knead at her cheeks as he kept up the slow, jolting rhythm.

Thumb, singular. A wet pad pressed over another hole and began to massage in circles. Christina almost choked on her own spit. Instead she made a humiliating sound and might have tilted her hips to meet him.

*No!*

Why was it wrong? Why was it wrong if she enjoyed some of it?

*Because it's Bill, and Bill is a prick.*

Finger replaced thumb, spit-slick and assertive. Her mouth came open when the tip of it pushed inside her ass. A whine came out when it burrowed further, rasping past all kinds of nerves and confusion.

The pattern of his thrusts evened out now; it seemed like he couldn't maintain the same kind of focus while his hand had an agenda of its own. And that agenda was fingering her ass while he fucked her.

*Asshole Bill is fingering your asshole, Christina Lee!*

She gave up a choking sound as her throat and tongue couldn't figure out if they wanted to laugh or cry.

The digit plumbed in and out, roughly in time with the movement of his cock, and the entire business was utterly wrong. Wrong and ... something else. He'd better be watching her ass and not seeing her face turning red.

What had been bizarre, though simple enough, became more difficult. There was a new tightness. What was he—

A second finger.

Christina gave up and let the noises come. This could be her secret shame, that she was letting this happen. There was no possible way this could have repercussions after today. Nope. Nosiree.

She had no control over what was coming and going in and out of her holes. Nothing should be coming in *or out* of that tight little pucker between her cheeks in front of another person, and especially not the man who handed her a paycheck every two weeks. But here it was happening anyway.

And here was her pussy, sucking him down, making embarrassing wet noises around his girth. Here was her back, trying to arch like it had no clue



what an indication like that might mean to the man behind her.

He was rotating the fingers, corkscrewing in and out. Scissoring them, stretching her. Her nails scraped over the table, eyes shut tight.

But shut tight because it felt ... good.

*‘Double Penetrated in the Back of the Haul Ash’ is the worst porno title ever. Congratulations, Dodd.*

Everything stopped.

Motion. Sound. Breathing.

Her pussy and ass were full of Bill Marshall. All her private places were exposed and tacky with her own juice and probably some of his spit. The moment was competing with a scant few others for the most powerless she’d ever felt in her life. Then, he spoke.

“You want the rest of today off, too?”

She swallowed, wetting her throat. “What?” Christina hadn’t considered having to sit around here all evening after this crazy shit had gone down. It wasn’t like she’d planned it.

The two fingers shifted. “You let me have this ass, you can go home. I’ll stay the rest of your shift.”

*Huh?*

Bill was going to disrupt his precious schedule for *anal*?

There was a lot to inventory in an extremely short span of time. Letting him fuck her at all was bad enough. There was that. And there was the fact that his two fingers were one finger more than she’d ever had in her ass. He hadn’t been a monster with her pussy, but this was anal. But did she want to stay here? Talking to customers? Printing invoices? Cleaning the office? There was nowhere to really clean herself up but the decrepit little bathroom. Was she going to finish her shift with her boss leaking down the backs of her—

“Okay,” she blurted. “Yeah.”

“ ‘Yeah’ what?”

“Yeah, I want to leave.” She closed her eyes again and thought of the promise of her shower, waiting at home. “You can ... you can have it.”

“All right,” he said, pulling out of both her holes at once. “Good.”

*All right? Good? What a weird fucking thing to say.*

But then what could he say at this point that *wouldn't* be weird?

And now there was a spongy cock head pushing between her cheeks.

*Relax. You gotta relax or this shit is gonna hurt.*

It didn't, though.

He was wet from her pussy—that backstabbing little muffin!—and all his earlier fingering had her ass relaxed and slick. *Strategic motherfucker*. She thought the ring would fight him, but it didn't, at least not very much. He teased the tip in and out and, though the humiliating wrongness was off the charts, it cost her no more than a dull ache at this point.

But that was only an opening act. Bill held her cheeks apart with his hands and worked his cock further, *further*. At each new push, too, he made sure to pull out and remind her disoriented hole with a new entry that it ought to be good and stay open wide for him.

There was only so far he could go. When she felt the open sides of his fly brushing her upturned cheeks, the bristle of male hair nestling in between, something just behind her breastbone gave a little shudder. Bill Marshall was balls deep in her ass. And now he was going to fuck it.

She didn't wait long. Callused thumbs still keeping her palmed open, probably for him to leer at what he'd gotten his only female employee to give up, he began to have what he wanted.

These were short thrusts now, not the total withdrawals and plunges he'd inflicted on her pussy. Enough for some friction, enough so he might add some speed. Out of the very corner of her eye, she saw his hands leave her hips and come down onto the table. He was leaning over her now, the bell of his untucked shirt brushing the small of her back.

The wood banging on the wall was percussive and quick. Christina lay there in a stupor, knees locked, legs making a fork, at the apex of which, her tender hole was stretching around her boss's cock.

He made no sound, save the very occasional and restrained grunt. The girth was relentless: there was no avoiding it, no becoming immune. She could only gape for him, wide like her mouth in some eternally startled 'O'.

And her clit! The poor thing was swollen, humming for relief. The sensations were ... doing ... *something*, but nothing that could get her—

*You are not thinking about how you're going to come right now! Not here! Not with him.*

She ought not to be thinking about it, but there was nothing stopping Bill.

His prick hardened. Expanded. His pistoning slowed by half. She could feel him hunching behind her, swearing under his breath.

*You insane bitch, you didn't even make him get a cond—*

The pulse came.

And then the second. The third. Hot cum jetted down deep in her ass, coating the twitching cock embedded there. He scrubbed her insides with it, lubricating her, spreading her shame, as her pussy clamored to get just a little piece.

*You're getting Friday. And the rest of today. That's what you asked for, that's what you get.*

When he pulled out, she felt the leak, warm and incriminating as it oozed from her fluttering hole. After two deep breaths where she was sure he was done and gone, Christina began to right herself.

“No,” he said. “Stay where you are.”

She twisted her body. Turned her head, “What?”

“I said, stay right there. Back down how you were.”

This nightmare wasn't over?

*If it's a nightmare, you agreed to it.*

She leaned back down and sighed. The air from the vent overhead was cooling the fluids between her legs. One of her socks had slipped down inside her boot.

There were rummaging sounds, perhaps in a drawer, and then footsteps. A hand was back on her ass. Then not.

A tug on her panties. He was pulling them taut. Then she heard metal shearing through cloth.

“Bill!”

“Hold still.”

Another snip and the tension was gone from her thighs. He’d cut off her goddamned underwear!

“Now you’re good.”

She popped up this time, spinning to cover her backside with the dress, and eyed him in shock. His right hand was already pulling up out of his front pocket, and what was left of her panties was down in there somewhere, irretrievable.

His Adam’s apple moved under a fine stubble. He wet his lips, and seemed about to say something. She could have grabbed the silence in the room and throttled it. His eyes cut to the door to go outside and then back to her, and he jerked a stiff nod.

“All right,” he said. “See you Monday.”



William James Marshall was flat-out, stupid in love with Christina Lee Dodd. And not just because she'd let him have a piece on the table in the back half of the office. No, this had been going on for a while.

The clock above the front door told him he could shut the place down in ten minutes. Really, he could do it at any time. It was his business. But that wasn't the way he ran things.

He pulled her panties out of his pocket for about the twentieth time that night and ran his thumb over the ruined fabric. Had she known yellow was his favorite color? No. He'd seen the shock on her face at the ridiculous offer he'd made. There was no way she'd thought that far ahead.

*And there was no way you could have called her response.*

Oh, she'd been trying, that was for sure. The sky was the deep blue of early evening outside, and he thought it might have been as dark as her dress. She never wore dresses. Never wore all that hair down. Didn't need to either, but *damn*.

*You cut her fucking panties off, you maniac.*

Sheeit. That was the least he'd done. His perfect little Christina had let him bury his dick way down in her perfect little ass and fill her full of cum. And just a little bit ... just a little, he could tell she'd enjoyed it.

He made a fist around the slip of yellow cloth and swore, stuffing it back into his jeans.

Ten minutes. He stood up and made his way outside, his steps crunching over gravel toward the shop to start locking everything down.

It was out of sheer impotent frustration he'd blurted out an offer like that at all. She was so ... so goddamn everything. He'd hired her because she was the only applicant who knew anything about the new scheduling

software, but after being around her day after day for all that time, she was just too good to be real.

She was sweet—well, except maybe for first thing in the mornings—and even-keeled. Almost nothing riled her, even the nastiest customers with their tired demands, or Jonah and Travis with their jokes men ought not to tell in front of women. She was quick as lightning and kind, even to him, and he knew damn well what everyone called him behind his back. She was even funny, in her own, dry way. Hell, she was usually even on time.

She was miles and miles out of his league, not to mention way too young. What was she, twenty-four? Or maybe that was wrong. *She* was just fine. *His* ass was too old; that's what it was.

It was at some point, maybe around this last Christmas, when she'd come in with that stupid Santa hat and white teeth grinning out from behind some rare red lipstick, and put a little package of gingerbread men right by his arm on the counter that he'd figured it out.

*Aw, hell. You're fucked, Marshall.*

He batted a swarm of moths away from the light hanging outside the shop door and ducked his head inside to make sure everything was turned off before he closed the place up for the night. Nothing was out of place, and his keys jangled as he locked and bolted the door. The roll-ups were already done.

Inside again, he locked the door to the back half. Made sure the light wasn't on in the bathroom. The mini fridge door was shut tight—didn't need to ruin a bunch of people's lunches again. The air conditioning was off.

He could *feel* those goddamned underwear taking up space, right next to his wallet. The urge to take them out and stare at them again had him setting his jaw.

*You can make it up by bending that pretty little ass over this table for me.*

As soon as it had come out of his mouth, he'd wanted to swallow it up, to take it back. But when she'd agreed ... there was no other way to say it: it had sort of pissed him off.

A flaw had shown up in the way he'd been idealizing her. His perfect Christina was not so perfect. Not if she was willing to let her prick of a boss



take down her panties for one lousy day off.

Well. A day and a half.

Her agreement had made him turn some corner. She was gonna give it up just like that? For a long weekend? Fine. Then he could stop beating off on his couch at one in the morning and just have it. He was never going to be with her in any other real sort of way, so he could take this and fill up his spunk bank forever.

Bill shut down the front office computer. Flipped the plastic OPEN sign over and cut the overhead lights. Set the alarm. The front door lock twisted closed with his key, and he headed on around to the side where he'd parked his truck.

And, oh, she'd been so good. Sweet Jesus.

Those long legs coming up out of those boots. Little panties pulled down. Pussy so fucking tight.

And wet! He bit off a growl. Stepped up into his truck. He still couldn't believe she'd let him have her ass. Really? *Really?*

*You're goddam lucky she's not gonna be here tomorrow. How you gonna walk around the shop, hard as trigonometry all day? Fuck.*

The engine rumbled to life on his '02 Ram. He put an arm on the back of the seats and twisted to watch where he was backing up. Never trusted mirrors.

He wasn't two miles down the highway, high-beams skimming the asphalt, before her panties were in his hand again. There was one thing about this. One thing, though ...

If Christina would pay with that sweet little body for a day off, there might be other things she needed. He squeezed the soft handful in his lap. There were things Bill needed, that was for sure.

And if he couldn't have what he really wanted, maybe he could get the next best thing.

Maybe.



“You have one more week, Miss Dodd.”

“I understand, Your Honor.”

Christina kept her answers short and subdued before the county judge, her eyes on the honey-colored wood of the bench rather than meeting the nearly colorless blue of his.

What was it about courtrooms that was so daunting? Was it the windowless, fluorescent chamber, all right angles, that oppressed the air? Was it that no external sounds filtered in, no twittering birds or airplanes far overhead? Everything about the space amounted to one big stop sign.

Everything said, “No, no, and no.”

“If the County Inspector shows up next Friday and he doesn’t see enough progress, we’re going to have to reinstate the proceedings on the property. This is the last extension I’m giving you.”

The statement squeezed at something beneath her ribs.

“I understand, Your Honor.”

“I hope you do. Dismissed.”

She didn’t even see the courtroom as she collected her manila envelope and made her exit. Past the other people still waiting for appointments, out through the heavy door, out through the hallways of the county courthouse, and outside into the sunshine.

When she hit concrete steps and blue sky, Christina took a deep breath. There. Her lungs could work again.

She’d bought just a little more time. Just a little more. And now she could get back to work. Furious, furious work that would also take infinite delicate patience on her part. She shook her head on the way out to the Bronco, pulling her keys out of her purse as she went.

It was already half-past three, and she still had to drive twenty-two miles back to Ashland. Today was more or less shot, but she still had all day Saturday and Sunday. Today had been the crucial day, however. If she hadn’t been able to show up for that court appointment ... she didn’t want to think about it.

The Bronco rumbled its way out of town and carried her down the highway. Road noise was not enough of a distraction from her problems. Not from the shitshow tomorrow was going to be, and not from the means by which she'd procured today off to start dealing with tomorrow.

*I have got to get this radio fixed. Too much time in my own fucking head.*

By the time she got home, she was wishing she bothered keeping alcohol in the house.

The name Ashland Estates evoked rolling green lawns and manicured country club vistas, but that was the way of things, wasn't it? The most prestigiously named properties were invariably the shittiest. The Royal Golden Paradise Hotel would be a combination meth-lab and cockroach resort, while Two Brown Sticks would be where the rich people went on summer weekends and got spa treatments worth more than her truck.

Well. Probably a lot of things were worth more than her truck. A lot of things were worth more than her singlewide in its northwest corner lot of the Ashland Estates, but it was what she had, and there was no time to loaf around worrying about what she didn't have.

She pulled the Bronco in under the awning that served as a carport. The familiar steps, the familiar screen door that stuck, the familiar yellow light filtering in through the windows at that time of day all greeted her as she made her way into the house.

Purse and shoes discarded, she flopped down on her little green loveseat and stared at the ceiling. Got up and fussed with some of the dishes in the sink. She paused to lean in the doorway between her bedroom and the living room, waiting for the problems to, pretty please, solve themselves.

She gave up and headed for the shower, which made for an exercise in futility, and not just because she would only get filthy again tomorrow and the day after that.

*You were filthy yesterday, too, weren't you?*

There. That was the other problem with showers. They cut loose the reins on her mind and now she was all over the place again.

She was scrubbing shampoo through her hair and trying to dodge flashes of memory. Her body tilting for his entry, the breathy noises that had escaped around her shame when those fingers ...

*Rrrgh! Stop!*

She was rubbing a washcloth over her face and debating his motivations. Did he have some interest in her to begin with? More likely, Bill was just the sort of prick who'd want to bend her over and humiliate her. One big power trip for him.

*Who gives a fuck about why, Christina? It's over. It's done.*

She was dragging a razor along the front of her shin and trying to figure out how she was going to walk around the Haul Ash like nothing had happened. Would he lord it over her now? Would he brag to the guys?

The razor nicked her at the kneecap when the train of her thoughts arrived at that last one.

Shit. She really couldn't deal with it if they all knew. Sideways looks for sure. Snickers. Comments, maybe. Travis and Jonah didn't seem like the kind of guys who would ...

She was wrapping her hair in a towel and frowning at the lack of other job opportunities in and around Ashland. This stop in the road didn't even qualify as a whole one-horse town. Maybe a tail or a hoof, and that was being generous. And this was where she needed to be right now. She couldn't go commuting all over.

*You're buying anxiety over stuff that ain't even happened yet.*


It was true. The rest of this weekend was going to have her pulling her hair out enough. Consequences for everything else would have to wait until Monday.

And right this minute, she needed to put some clothes on and go poke around in the fridge.

Christina stared at her current option for way too long before taking what she needed and closing the door.

Yup. She'd gotten to court on time, *and* she was making herself a grilled cheese sandwich.

"I am an *adult*," she said to no one, and started spreading the butter.



### chapter 3

By Monday, muscles Christina didn't even know she had were sore. She felt like she'd been run over by one of the box trucks out on the lot, and she'd been at the Haul Ash since six-thirty, just wishing she'd brought more ibuprofen.

She'd enjoyed both the blessing and curse of the opening shift that day. Curse because hauling her stiff limbs out of bed, her puffy eyes in the direction of coffee, had felt like she'd never gone to sleep at all. But blessing because Bill was closing that day, and she was able to settle back into the routines of work at her own pace for over six hours without having to also deal with ... all that.

At the front counter, about ten minutes to one, she was skimming down the form by rote, making little tick marks with a pen.

"If you can just sign here," she said to the customer, "and initial here that you're declining the protection plan ..."

The woman took the pen and glanced over the paperwork. Her husband hovered behind her, jingling impatient keys in his pocket while she signed.

"Okay," Christina said, tearing paper, "here is your copy. If you just go outside to the right here, Jonah will show you which truck and you can do your walk-around."

The man was already pushing his way back out the front door while his wife was still sliding her credit card back into her wallet, when Bill's truck came crunching in off the highway.

*Here we go. Batten down the fucking hatches.*

By the time her boss had made his way to the front door, her nerves were singing in distress. When the string of bells clinked at his entry, she pretended to be knee-deep in examining the waiver the customer had just handed back to her, only to just 'incidentally' glance up at his arrival. As

though she hadn't been staring, bug-eyed since his truck rolled up, like a deer in the super-awkward my-boss-just-banged-me-last-week headlights.

He did no more than flick his eyes in her direction before heading into the back half.

Christina stood there, hovering in a weird nexus of uncertainty for maybe a full five minutes before he popped the door to the front open again.

"Jonah outside?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah."

His head and shoulder disappeared and the door fell shut.

She sat on the computer stool and blinked some more.

*Sooo ... that's it? He'd just gonna ignore it?*

She could work with that. Ignore, ignore, ignore. Like nothing ever happened. If he wasn't going to say anything, she wasn't going to say anything. That was it.

*Unless he's out there telling Jonah right now.*

But then, he would have had all day Friday to tell whomever he wanted. If he'd been exchanging high-fives already—something she could not picture the ever-serious Bill Marshall doing—Jonah would have already been acting weird. So far he'd just been normal Jonah: the good-natured, somewhat shy, twenty-year-old guy who worked part-time at the Haul Ash. No leers. No odd comments.

Christina pulled up the scheduling software and put in her password. Chewed on her lip while she watched the orange loading screen.

*Fuck, fuckity, fuck fuck fuck.*

If it continued like this, no one saying anything, did that mean it would get less weird from here on out, or more?

There was only one more pickup scheduled for that day, and it wasn't happening until five, so she wouldn't be the one to deal with it. Still, she printed the customer information and paper-clipped it to the forms to shove in the 'Out' tray, for lack of other things to do.

When the door to the back half banged open just before two, she started, but forced herself to stare at the monitor like she was trying to set it on fire,



rather than whip around and look unnerved in case it was Bill.

“Hey.” It was Jonah and she exhaled in relief. “Here you go.” She turned on the stool as he slid her the last customer’s walk-around checklist.

“Thanks.”

“The car dolly’s all ready to go.” He was already heading for the time clock.

“ ‘Preciate it.” Her chorus of aches would go on for at least another day or two, she was sure, and if Jonah had taken care of the heavy lifting for the day, it was all right by her. “See you ... tomorrow?”

“Thursday,” he said, shrugging on the backpack he always brought.

“Oh, right. See you Thursday, then.”

“Later.”

In the predictable two and a half minutes, Jonah’s white Civic was pulling out of the lot. Travis liked to tease him because he was the only one of them who didn’t drive some sort of truck.

His departure marked two hours left in her shift. She could make it. The Walk of Shame day was not going to get her. Bill was out in the—

“Christina.”

*Shit.*

“Yeah?”

“Get this door for me.”

She got up and pushed open the door to the back half, and Bill crab-walked through carrying an unwieldy flat pack of corrugated boxes like a person-sized shield.

“There’s more,” he said, as he leaned them against the back wall.

Two more times he returned with stacks of boxes, and two more times she held the door.

*See? He’s all business now. You can handle this.*

The banded bundles of six cartons each were for customer purchase, and her boss straightened them in groups because, in addition to being an

asshole, he was also anal retentive. At least when it came to the state of the front half. The shop was another story.

She'd gone back to the computer and was putting on a fantastic show of ignoring him some more, by the time he spoke again.

"Christina, when's the last time you had a pay increase?"

*Um ... what?*

"I ... got one at the end of my first year?" The response came out of her at the speed of memory, which just then was coming slow. Probably because red flags were flapping all around like she was at the goddamned Chinese embassy.

"I'd like to talk about another one."

Christina rotated the stool to face him, her features a map of neutrality. There was absolutely zero chance this was unrelated to what had happened on Thursday. Her posture was very straight, and she said nothing.

"I'm looking for an hour a week from you."

An hour a ...

*Ooooh, my fucking go—*

Then he said a number and she swore out loud. Couldn't help it.

Nothing about his demeanor had changed. Same sober brows, same hard mouth. No smirking or sneering, nothing to indicate a joke.

It was at least half again what she already made. Damn sure more than Travis or Jonah made. Coworkers talked.

How ... how did she even respond to something like this? Laugh? Call him a pervert? Storm out? That stare of his pinned her to the spot like a butterfly.

"I, uh"—she cleared her throat—"I assume I know what the, um ... the hour is for?"

He gave her a single slow nod.

*Fffuck.*

She wanted to scoot around past him and out the front door, never to return again. She shouldn't have said 'yes' last week. This shit wouldn't be happening right now.

*But the money. Dammit, that would be enough to—*

“For how many weeks?” And there was her mouth, writing checks the rest of her couldn’t, or at least shouldn’t, cash.

He gave the barest of dry chuckles. “How long do you need the money?” A rhetorical question to which he already knew the answer. Did her face look as pathetic as she felt?

*There’s no way you’re even going to consid—*

“Can I decide and tell you tomorrow?”

*What is there to decide? You can’t give a shit about letting him down easy, can you?*

“Nope,” he said. “You can tell me right now.”

Christina wanted to scream.

The only answer was ‘no’, right? She couldn’t let it happen *again*. It was one thing to act out of desperation that one time, but doing it for a pay raise?

The things she could do with that money, though. She could finally hire some help. The amount of worry she was cramming into each day right now was not sustainable.

Something small and proud inside her howled as Christina ran scenarios. Parsed logistics.

The exchange on Thursday had been relatively quick.

*The ‘exchange’. Ugh.*

He hadn’t asked for anything creepy. Not beyond what most guys wanted, anyway. It could have been far worse.

*Who’s to say it won’t still be?*

She could deal with so many problems. Put up with his dick once a week ... that wouldn’t be so big a price, would it?

*You do this for money ...*

“All right,” she said. “Fine.”

*... and you’ll be a whore.*

Everyone was a whore, though, really. Everyone had a price. People sold the labor of their bodies all the time. Building houses, working on cars ...

Fucking Bill Marshall.

He gave another nod at her acceptance, as if it were just another bullet point on a list of job duties.

“Anything you want to add?” he said.

“Add?” She had one leg extended off the stool, foot touching the floor as though she would bolt if he complicated it by one more degree.

“Stuff you ain’t gonna do.”

*Fuck. How about, have sex with you?*

What could she ask for? Anal was probably out; he was clearly into that. Start making too many exceptions, he might nix the deal. The idea of no deal floated as a relief, but then what? Would he just find some reason to fire her?

She closed her eyes. Let a breath out through her nose before meeting his eyes again. They were dark brown and terrifying in their patience.

“No kissing on the mouth.” He dipped a nod. “No hurting me on purpose.” Another.

After a few prolonged seconds of eye contact more she added: “You can’t pass me around to your friends.”

“I don’t have any friends.”

Now *that* she could believe.

“And you can’t bring anyone in to watch. Or be like ... talking to people about it.”

“I don’t need other people involved in my business,” he said. “That it?”

Her brain dashed around in a frantic recon. Was there anything else? Christina frowned, sure she was forgetting something.

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s it.”

“So that’s the deal.” He hadn’t moved from where he stood the entire time. “One hour a week. I don’t kiss you, I don’t hurt you. No other people. No talk.”

She gave a hurried little nod, as though she could sneak agreement past her conscious objections.

“I have one more thing,” he said, moving at last toward the door to the back. “From now on, you wear skirts or dresses. No pants.”

Her cheeks heated in an instant, as though this demand was what made it real.

“Bill, I have like, two dresses.”

He made a growling noise and stuffed his hand into a pocket. Retrieved his wallet. “Go buy some more.” He thumped some folded bills on the counter, making her feel dirtier by an order of magnitude.

The door swung shut behind him again, and Christina was numb to further reaction.

He avoided her for the rest of her shift. She avoided contemplating what she’d done.

Insanity, apparently, felt like nothing.

Nothing until she clocked out at four and fled in the Bronco toward a grocery run and now, somewhere that had skirts.

*This is insane. You are insane.*

How did she even know he would give her the raise?



It was chocolate brown, the new skirt, and swished around just above her knees, carefree and oblivious as Christina walked from her truck to the Door to Whoredom, AKA the Haul Ash on a Tuesday. She pretended to hold out some sliver of dignity up top with a yellow tee-shirt, albeit a fitted one. She could have found a baggy one as a silent ‘fuck you’, but then it would have looked weird to everyone else and she didn’t want to have to come up with excuses.

An impressive amount of mental fortitude propelled her legs forward, when their every muscle wanted to bolt like a terrified rabbit.

Travis pushed his way out the front door right when she was about to open it, snuggling his ball cap on and joggling his keys in the bright midday light.

“Lunch?” she said.

“Yup. See ya in a little bit.”

*Great. Alone already.*

Bill glanced at her from behind the counter as she entered the building, but that was it. The time clock beeped at twelve fifty-eight, two minutes early for her own funeral service.

“Credit card system is down.” He nodded to an ancient swipe machine, excavated from god-knew-where, complete with a stack of perforated carbon forms next to it on the counter. “We’ll use that if we have to.”

Leave it to Bill to have one of those things lying around somewhere. They’d only just started running the place from a computer system or anything else even remotely electronic right before he’d hired her.

“There’s a guy coming to spray around the foundation for ants at two,” he said, rising to give her the computer. “I’m gonna go finish pulling stuff away from the walls.” And just like that, he was out the front door, the AC kicking on in his wake.

She put her purse away and heaved a sigh. *Alone*, alone. That was much better, yeah? She forced her shoulders to fall back to their usual place, stretching the tension in her neck on both sides.

How did he do it? He was just so normal, like he gave out raises for sex every day. Nothing seemed to flap him or alter his attitude in the slightest. Who the fuck was that self-assured?

But then again, *he* probably had a plan. *He* knew what was going on.

Christina didn’t know anything. What had he told her, besides he wanted an hour a week? Did he want it here again? Would he wait until the end of her shift?

Not today, at least. She was closing and he had opened: he would have to make some unlikely excuse to stay around that long after he ought to be gone. Asshole Bill and his Schedule were BFFS. Everyone knew that.



By the time the pest control guy had come and gone, Christina had settled into the reality of performing her every task with a knot in her gut. Of holding her breath any time the door to the back half opened, sure that it was her boss, and he was going to ... to what? Clear the counter in the sweep of an arm and drag her up onto it?

*You have to stop. You're gonna be a nervous wreck.*

She stopped lining the binder clips in the tray underneath the counter up in a perfect zig-zagging row.

Too late.

The door swung open again and she gasped.

"Take it easy, Dodd." Travis gave her a funny look while wiping his hands on a red shop rag.

"You scared the crap out of me!"

"Yeah, no shit," he said. "It's five, why don't you take your lunch? You can go zone out in the back."

Her face got hot. She probably *had* been staring off into space.

This whole mess with Bill was not going to be helping her reputation around here at all. It hadn't even come to the creepy part yet.

She'd been trying to make sure no one thought of her as the office princess since she started working there. It was her own special paranoia: that people would think she was useless. Afraid of hard work. She pulled her weight, she didn't fuss about getting dirty or lifting heavy. Didn't complain about whatever shifts Bill assigned her, last Friday aside. Now here she was wearing dresses and daydreaming on the clock.

"Yeah, I probably should." She slid down off the stool. "That way I'm back before you leave."

"Okay." He was already squinting into the monitor as she moved into the back half. The guy just needed to admit he needed glasses, already.

Despite it being a slow day, lunch was the first time Christina had been able to relax since she'd arrived. Behold, the restorative power of chewing slowly while reading a book!

She set herself up at the card table with a chicken sandwich, a bag of baby carrots, and her second replacement copy of *Zen and the Art of*

*Motorcycle Maintenance.* She kept lending it to people and they kept not bringing it back.

The writing was dense, and she chewed food and words while the Haul Ash receded for half an hour and the late afternoon light turned gold. It was almost enough to reset her stress barometer to something like her normal level.

Or at least it would have been, had Bill not come through the door to the front half while she was stashing the rest of her carrots back in the fridge.

The eye contact was immediate and purposeful. Every fine hair she had stood on end.

“What time does that clock say?” he asked, as the door shut behind him. There was a no-frills wall clock hanging high above the sink, but her boss didn’t bother to look at it.

“Uh, five thirtyyy ... three?” Christina’s nerves were right back to frayed, and heading toward a complete snap in half. This had nothing to do with what time of day it was.

“In the bathroom,” he said. “Let’s go.”

The sounds of his words, low and clipped, got to her ears before her brain processed meaning. When it did, she hissed at him, eyes darting around as though the walls had ears. “What? Right now?”

“Right now.”

The man was serious as a heart attack and closing the distance. He had a hand on her upper back. Had the bathroom door open. He was herding her, closing them into the smaller space, her steps dumb and faltering at the complete lack of precedent for what she ought to be doing.

Her stupor wore off when he locked the door.

*Fuck. FUCK.*

“Give me your underwear.”

How could he be so quiet and have her heart racing at the same time? No matter how much he said he was going to inflate her paycheck, this was *not* an even exchange. Asshole Bill had *all* the power.

“Come on.” His fingers twitched in an impatient gesture to mimic his words.

Some force outside reason had her bending at the waist, reaching beneath her skirt. She slid a nude pair of bikini panties, as boring as the yellow ones he'd cut off her last week, down her legs and over one pointed foot after the other. The flats she wore caught at the elastic, some last inanimate protest at whatever she was about to allow.

He took the wad of fabric and stuffed it in his pocket without ceremony.

Christina couldn't get a handle on this guy. He didn't do anything creepy-cliché with her panties, like smell them. He didn't have any smirking words to humiliate her with for handing them over. What was his game?

"Put your knee up on the sink."

*Put ... my knee?*

She looked down at herself and scrunched up her face. Her left hip was already leaning against the edge of the porcelain, and she lifted her foot, not sure how this was going to—

"No, turn around."

*Oh. Duh.*

The level of surreality had opened the doors on her brain like a canary cage. Everything useful had flown for freedom and left her with a pile of feathers.

She turned, parallels to last Thursday not lost on her, and lifted her right leg so the bent knee rested on the cool white edge of the sink. She ended up like an awkward stork and had to put a hand on the wall to keep herself upright.

*Look at you, spreading right out for him, just like that.*

But heaping shame on herself was not going to counter the hands lifting her skirt, tucking the hem in the back into the waistband. Open air brushed bare cheeks and thighs now. Bare everything.

Christina was too afraid to look back there. Too afraid to see what his face looked like. With no preamble, there was a hand between her legs. Fingers massaging her pussy and, because she could get no breaks in life, whatsoever, smearing wetness.

*How. How?*

Here they were again, an impossible scenario repeating itself like those stories that would surface every now and then of some guy who'd been struck by lightning a half a dozen times. How was she not in a complete drought state down there? Her body had no shame at all.

And there was nothing demure or subtle about how the position spread her for his access. Cool air lapped its way up her furrow, along between her cheeks. Slick parts of her separated, and her scent drifted in the little room.

She inhaled with a sharp sound when two fingers squirmed for entry, and bit her lip to cut off the noise. "What about Travis?" she said.

"Then be quiet."

The fingers were gone and then he was handing her something small and square.

"Open this."

*Really, now he has a condom?*

It wasn't as though either of them had planned the first encounter, she could admit that much. Then again, it hadn't stopped them. Christina frowned as she took the packet, the sound of a zipper descending behind her as she tore the foil.

She held the thing up by the rim and he took it. Delicate rolling latex noises accompanied the rush of blood in her ears.

A denim-clad leg shuffled up against hers and a steadying hand flattened at her lower back. The man was not wordy at all. He only seemed to talk when he needed, and what was there to say right now? There was the head, aiming, lining up, warm erection nudging into her body with that slightly uncanny texture that came with condom-covered flesh.

A solid push, a partial withdrawal, and then another push and he was there, hips on her ass again. And then he was fucking her.

Fucking her.

Fucking.

She bounced on the filling cock, grateful in that moment the bathroom had nothing in the way of a mirror. She couldn't watch Bill Marshall plowing her on the edge of the sink like a lot lizard. Couldn't watch his hand on her hip for leverage while he stretched her pussy with his girth.

The thought pushed a squeak out of her.

“Shh!” He punctuated his command for silence with a sharp thrust, and she had to clench her jaw not to yelp.

But her noises weren’t coming from pain, and she scrunched her eyes shut. He wasn’t going at any sort of wild speed, but he wasn’t moving patiently through long, slow strokes like last week. This was a dick that had a job to do and—

*Oh!*

She dropped her head below the line of her bracing arm on the wall. Her breathing deepened and the way in and out of her body became smoother still for him as she leaked arousal.

What was this? The thrill of getting caught? Travis was right on the other side of the wall, at the front counter, but nothing was keeping him there. It sure as fuck wasn’t Asshole Bill himself. The man had a sort of Don Draper thing going on at certain angles, maybe, but as soon as he opened his mouth, his personality killed any shot he had at being attracti—

“I said be quiet.”

Before it even dawned on her she’d been making more noise, he was stuffing something soft and plentiful past her parted lips. When his left hand came around, rough, to cover her mouth, her eyes went wide again.

Her breath started in and out of her nose at a furious pace as her wadded panties subdued her tongue and soaked up against her palate. The fingers of his right hand were wedging between the thigh and calf of her bent leg, making room. In a single concerted hoist, he had her knee over his forearm, her pussy splayed even further, and he began to go at her with a will.

The gag came as an unlikely blessing. Bill Marshall took what he’d paid for, and Christina started filling the damp cloth full of an ugly song. It was a grunted, percussive melody that shouldn’t be.

The tiny, cheap little bathroom contained her secret sin. Saliva dampened the fingers clamping around her mouth, which couldn’t stay shut as he filled her, again and again. Her boss’s pounding cock felt *good*.

Dammit, *dammit*, why did it have to feel good?

His back covered hers and hot breath came at her ear. The snap of his hips became erratic and he started holding his depth each time he bottomed out. With a controlled grunt that cut off into nothing halfway through, he planted himself to the hilt. Hot, hard dick pulsed and jerked.

He kept them sealed together as though the rest of his orgasm depended on it. The tip of him pushed on her at the very back, unrelenting until she almost bit him in discomfort, but then he was pulling away. Exhaling. Dropping her knee.

Christina hop-stumbled to a stand and pulled the sodden panties out of her mouth. She turned to face him, skirt falling into place as he buried the condom in the trash under a pile of crumpled paper towels.

Her first urge was to wipe up, but some weird shyness made her avoid that in front of Bill.

*Why? He's seen everything else.*

She eyed her underwear. They were half wet from spit, but it wasn't like she had pockets to smuggle them out of there. She made a face and stepped back into them, pulling the clingy fabric up to cool against her skin.

Bill stuck his head out the door first, and then held it open for her with a splayed palm. She sidled past him, the hum of incompleteness still rampant between her thighs. When the difference in air quality hit her, Christina turned right back to the scene of the crime.

The little aerosol air freshener never knew what hit it.

*Great, now it smells like pine trees and sex in there.*

"Now what time does it say?"

She blinked and looked at the clock. "Five forty-five?"

"All right," he said, flatline as ever. "That was twelve minutes."

Twelve *minutes*? It had felt like a day and a half! And what did that *mean* anyway?

Her face must have been a mess of confusion because he answered her silent questions as he tucked in the rest of his shirt.

"I never said the whole hour would happen all at one time."

"Bill!" She jumped when Travis called from the front. "You back there?"

“Yeah.”

He left her standing agog as he shouldered through the door to the front.

What in the ever-loving fuck had she gotten herself into? Was it too late to back out now? What would he do if she did? Let her go?

*I need this job. I neeeed this job.*

She needed a fucking straight-jacket. That’s what she needed.

Fuck.



For all of Wednesday and Thursday, Bill had left her alone, and whether that had been a relief or even more nerve-wracking, Christina still couldn’t say.

Rather than try to analyze it, or any of her other problems, she lay on her side in bed, every last thing taken care of for the night—supper, shower, laundry put away—and escaped into the world of trashy romance novels.

She didn’t even bother with the modern ones. Those were too close to real life, and Christina Lee Dodd had put up with just about enough of that. The light of her phone, the only one in her bedroom now, was a tiny bright window, six inches from her face, into another time, another world.

She was a fly on the wall as some luckless widow had ended up on a pirate ship, and now the captain—naturally, it was never a deckhand, was it?—and the quartermaster were subjecting her to Very Bad Things. It was ridiculous, of course. Totally implausible that a woman could forgive behavior like that, but she knew she’d read on with rapt attention to see just how these fool characters came together in the end.

Those were her favorites, she found. The stories where the heroine hated her love interest at the beginning. It was oh-so-satisfying to read, but that shit didn’t happen in real life. Personalities in Asshoredom tended to remain in Asshoredom. It was Newton’s little known First Law of Fuckboys; she was pretty sure of that.

Dear god, this widow was going to let both of these pirates do her at the same time. Christina read the scene way too fast, her mouth open by the time she got to the end of it. She went back and read it again, trying to slow down, to really picture everything. To just *give in* that way, to shit that was wrong wrong wrong ... what in the hell could that even be like?

She stared at the screen at the end of her second read-through. Her first step back into reality was the awareness of her nipples, tight and tingling, just above the edge of her sheets.

*Well? Fuck it.*

The phone went face-down on her nightstand and Christina straightened onto her back. Her hand slipped under the covers to confirm ... Yup. Wet. A complete mess. What was one more trip to wash her hands before she fell asleep?

She disappeared into the cabin of a ship as her fingers played. She wasn't naked in her bed in East Texas, but wearing layers of long skirts some scoundrels had to push up, a bodice her breasts had to heave over at all the scandalous attention hundreds of years ago.

But it was just one pirate her mind conjured, not two, to bend her over. To take what he wanted. Her fingers plunged as she saw compass and charts flung aside, along with the fastenings of breeches and her objections. When he pushed her down, she wanted to squeal.

*"I said be quiet."*

One good throb out of nowhere, and Christina almost came, but that voice had been no pirate captain.

*No. No, no, no, you are not thinking of that right now.*

She made a face and found that sweet spot again, fixing the eighteenth century knave in her head, the swinging oil lamp overhead as his cock found her ...

But the fucking ship was gone and it was porcelain under her knee.

*Goddamnit.*

There were panties in her mouth and a rough hand stifling her noises.

*What the fuck is wrong with you?*



One leg was hooked over that muscular forearm and he was filling her full of cock in that bathroom. Her fingers flew, horrified, angry. Greedy.

Hot breath and male grunts of effort were in her ear.

*“You let me have this ass, you can go home.”*

“Fuck!”

She came, pissed off at generally everybody, clit throbbing without shame at a real life clusterfuck of a situation. The walls of her pussy clutched at nothing, milking a cock that wasn’t there. A specific cock that had no business showing up in her fantasy world.

Her heart rate slowed after, and Christina worked on the motivation to go wash up.

He was not doing this to her. This was a practical arrangement. He busted a nut, and now she had money to take care of her issues.

She shut off the tap in the bathroom and dried her hands on a towel.

Twelve minutes.

He was going to split the hour up however he wanted? Pull her into the back half whenever he felt like it? Push her skirt up and take her panties and say all of half a sentence while he spread her out and—

And how long could this shit last? If this was the level of stupidity to which it had escalated in less than a week? She couldn’t even run from it into her books?

Fuck Bill Marshall. Why had she thought she could handle something like this? He knew what he was doing and she clearly didn’t.

Sleep was the only escape left for tonight. Come Sunday, when she had to work again?

God only knew.



Seven-thirty in the fucking morning, he had a toothbrush in his mouth and a problem on his hands. Bill spat the rest of the toothpaste into the sink, gulped and swished some water, and spat again.

He had *just* gotten his standard morning hardon to go away, and now here it was again, tenting his shorts and bumping into the vanity like a blindfolded guy on a porn set.

His deodorant was in the drawer beneath the sink, and he fished it out, determined to keep his focus on getting ready for work. He still needed to put gas in the truck on his way down there.

*But you felt her, right? Pussy wet for you right when you bent her over?*

Bill slammed the drawer shut with a growl. His prick was jumping up and down, asking him to remember her body's responses. The feel, the smell of her.

It was too goddamned early for this.

He rubbed at his jaw in the mirror, assessing the level of stubble. Christina wouldn't be in today or tomorrow. He could probably skip it.

*You're shaving for her now? Gimme a break.*

But he wasn't the only one shaving. Totally bare under those panties—he'd wanted to bury his face in it. Both times, too, which meant that was just the way she kept it. God *damn*, Christina Lee Dodd had been walking around the Haul Ash this whole time hiding a shaved pussy under her jeans. Standing right next to him at the counter with it.

He had a handful and was tugging through his boxers.

Both times. He'd had sex with Christina twice, now.

And was she fucking with him? First the yellow underwear and then that tight yellow shirt?

*She can't know. You're being paranoid.*

It didn't matter what color her panties were, though, when they were in her mouth.

His dick was out through his fly now, and he'd given up the idea he could avoid jerking off. He didn't want to think about how many times he'd done it since their first encounter last Friday.

It was surreal. She'd just put her knee up on the sink. Just let him ... let him *fuck* her. Right there, with Travis in the other room. She'd let him *gag* her, for fuck's sakes. Didn't even fight it.

His cock swelled under the pull of his fist.

He'd been waiting for her to tap out, to say, 'You know what, I can't do this,' and she never did. It was like he was playing a game of chicken with himself to see at what point he would just stop and admit he was being a creep.

And all those little whimpers as he'd rooted up into that tight body, her panties muffling the sound ... What would those mewling noises feel like if they came from around his cock?

"Rrrggh!"

He was splattering an orgasm down the front of the vanity. Over his pumping knuckles. Breath hissed in and out through his teeth.

Shit. Here was another mess to clean up before he could leave.

Bill ran the water again and got himself straightened back out, obsession relieved again for at least a few more hours. The mirrored medicine cabinet gave up a nicotine patch to his rummagings, and he slapped it high on his left arm, damn sure he was going to need it today.

Back in the bedroom, he found and pulled on a clean undershirt. Started digging in his dresser for socks.

Today was Friday. He wouldn't have to see her again until Sunday.

*Good. You need to calm down.*

He was going to have to find things to do outside when she was there. Maybe try to clean up the shop, like he'd been talking about and never getting around to.

He didn't know if he could trust himself not to just hover around the front office and stare at her. Or do something reckless now that their bargain had him high on possibilities. Just what he needed, Jonah or Travis to come walking in from the back right when he's copping a feel.

*That would be a bad move, dude.*

Work boots laced, he headed to the kitchen to scoop up his keys from the counter.

There was no way he'd keep any sort of order around there if those two guys figured out he was banging Christina. As soon as one sideways look happened, one smart-ass comment ... And if either of them said *one* word to her ... He let go the fist he was making.

*What? 'Cause you're the only one who can talk to her now?*

But he sure as shit didn't want anyone else saying the kinds of things to her *he* wanted to say. Not if he could make her moan like that again.

Bill got in the Ram and fired it up, checking the clock on the dash. He still had plenty of time to get ga—

“Fuck!”

The driver's side door hung open while he cursed his way back into the house to get his wallet. On the outside of the cheap, brown leather, his own warning from two years ago in fading permanent marker reminded him, 'IF YOU BUY CIGARETTES I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU'. He stuffed the thing into his pants.

*You gotta calm down.*



Another day, another skirt, another opportunity for a nervous breakdown at the Haul Ash.

They closed earlier on Sundays, so there was only one shift. Bill's truck was already there when Christina pulled onto the lot. Jonah didn't appear to be there yet, but she was ten minutes early.

Purse on her shoulder and lunch in hand, she went for the door. Bill approached from the other side, keys jangling. She had her own set—they all did, in case someone needed to open or close the shop alone—but waited for him to twist open the lock. The door was never open to customers until the very minute indicated by the Business Hours sign hanging on the back side of the glass.

“Morning,” he said holding open the door. It came almost a grumble, compressed into a single syllable.

“Morning.”

They made no eye contact. She heard the lock again behind her, to stay that way for an entire eight and a half more minutes until the official day started.

Time clock. Purse under the counter. Lunch in the fridge. Asshole Boss sensors on high alert.

When she came back into the front, Jonah’s Civic was rolling up, and Bill was sliding the stool away from the counter with a boot.

“I’m gonna go get the shop opened up,” he said. “I left your paycheck under the keyboard.”

He gave her his back and unlocked the front door for the day, just in time for Jonah to come shuffling into the building. “ ‘S ‘ere coffee?” the younger man said through a yawn.

“No,” said Christina, fighting off the contagion. She lost and blamed him around a yawn of her own. “Dnocka-off.”

He hit the time clock and then the door to the back half, the call of caffeine guiding his steps. Bill was already outside.

The envelope holding her paycheck was a terrifying white rectangle under the front counter keyboard.

Bill usually handed them out every other Friday, but she’d been off that day. She could’ve just driven down here and picked it up, but Christina was *not* going force herself to look at him on her day off. Not now, anyway.

She flipped the envelope over in her hand and jammed her pinky under the corner of the sealed flap, tearing the paper with it in a crude pass. By the

time she pulled out the perforated check and stub inside, her pulse was racing.

It was not her normal paycheck.

Christina looked up, eyes darting around as though just holding the thing would be enough to start trouble if she got caught.

She checked the amount again.

*Fuck me.*

There it was. Her hourly rate inflated, just as much as he'd said. The black text tried to swim around on the white background of the stub, and she blinked, settling the numbers again. She mouthed the word 'what' as she squinted at the record.

He'd made the raise retroactive to the beginning of the pay period, even though their 'agreement' had begun more than halfway through it. She snorted, tucking the check into her purse with a shake of her head.

Part of her had never really believed he was going to do it. *That* part of her had spent the last few days cursing the *rest* of her for letting Asshole Bill start taking advantage of his side before she'd caught even a fleeting glance of hers. What would she have done if he'd just decided to screw her over? In more than one way at a time?

But he hadn't. He was good for his word. So far.

*Don't you dare give him credit. He gets zero points. If this shit makes you a whore, then he's the kind of guy who treats women like whores. He's the one who made the offer in the first place.*

It didn't matter, though. Christina could put whatever name she wanted on it. She could decide he was a bad guy or he wasn't. Or that she was this or that thing for agreeing to it.

What mattered was, she had the money. She could start making phone calls tomorrow. Getting some help. Her eyes closed and she sighed. Intangible weight tumbled from her shoulders.

Gravel crunched outside and she looked up again to see a white Suburban rolling in off the highway. The top sheet of paper in the outbox told her they were probably here for the twelve footer.

Time to get to work.



Sundays at the Haul Ash were either a ghost town or a madhouse. That day turned out to be the latter. Trucks and dollies came and went from the lot. Customers wanted more boxes than they ended up having in stock. The guys got overloaded in the shop. The phone wouldn't stop ringing. At least the credit card system was working again.

And at least Bill was leaving her alone.

Whether it was the nonstop parade of things to do or her boss was back to pretending everything was normal, Christina didn't see him except in passing for the bulk of her shift.

Not that it helped. Every time he needed something behind the counter, she was jumpy as a cat. He only spoke to her in short sentences, not one word more than he had to, but every one of them might as well have been, *'Put your knee up on the sink'*, for the way her gut reacted.

It was too busy, right? He wasn't going to just drag her back to the bathroom again, not with customers coming and going like this.

Right?

In a moment of relative calm, she'd slipped into the back half to wolf down her lunch. Even fifteen minutes with her face in her book had to count as some kind of escape.

By the time she returned to the counter, the lull appeared to be holding. The front office was empty and Jonah had the printer opened up like a cadaver. He was pulling tiny shreds of accorded paper out from between rollers and making a face.

"Stupid thing jam again?"

"Yeah," he said, "you get down to the last couple pieces of paper and it wants to suck 'em all in at once." He pulled out a last wrinkled sheet. "There."

Christina hefted a new ream of paper out from under the counter and started peeling open the wrapping.

“So, uh, Dodd,” Jonah said, slamming plastic hatches back into place, “what’s with all the dresses?”

“What?” She handed him about a third of the stack of paper, and he slid it into the lower tray.

“You been wearin’ nothin’ but dresses for like a week,” he said. “It’s weird.”

Her eyes fell to the skirt she had on today: mostly orange with white and blue flowers all over it. It came to just above her knees. Her face, on the other hand, was hot and mostly red. She could feel it.

“What? I can’t look like a girl if I want?”

“I guess.” He shrugged, unconvinced.

“I’m not out there slinging wrenches like you and Travis. I don’t have to wear pants all the time.”

*Could you sound any more defensive? Jeez.*

“Yeah, okay, shit,” he said, scooting the printer back in place. “Wear whatever you want, I’m just askin’. You usually wear jeans.” And without waiting for a response, added, “I’m gonna get some water.”

He escaped into the back half and Christina grimaced.

The other guys were bound to notice. She did wear jeans almost all the time. One of them would have said something sooner or later. She needed to get her reactions under control.

Sunday afternoon offered one more avenue for her to ignore her problems: it was time to put together purchase orders to send out on Monday. The task was routine and tedious; just what she needed.

They didn’t have much to restock other than some of the boxes, but she went through the motions anyway. Pulling the inventory reports. Checking to see if they could order enough stuff to get the free shipping some of their suppliers offered. Once she had the whole two pos ready, all she needed was an approval from—

The door to the back bumped open.

—from Bill.

He joined her behind the counter, and she couldn’t even look at him.



*That's your boss, Christina, and you know what his dick feels like.*

There was a metallic clinking as she heard him return a set of keys to the board full of hooks on the back wall. She sat frozen on the stool, facing the computer, willing him to go somewhere, anywhere, else.

Anywhere turned out to be two inches from her back.

He didn't touch her, but it didn't matter. The narrow buffer of air between them warmed in an instant.

"You stay after we lock up."

The words were quiet. From more than a couple steps away, no one else would have heard them.

And he stood there. For maybe ten more seconds. It felt like two hours, and why? Did he expect some sort of acknowledgment? Was he just trying to make a statement? That he was the one with the power here?

*Yeah, I got it. Asshole.*

The door bumped closed again and he was gone. She let out the breath she'd been holding. The clock on the computer told her she had twenty more minutes.

He wanted her there after closing. This wasn't spontaneous; her boss had a plan.

*Great.*

Her normal end-of-day tasks came and went in a disjointed blur. She fumbled the roll of paper for the credit card machine onto the floor. The bag ripped when she was trying to empty the little wastebasket they kept under the counter. She kept putting in the wrong password for the scheduling software.

When Jonah hit the time clock, she almost followed him. Habits meant safety, and by God, did she need some now. Bill coming in the front door just then and flipping the sign to 'CLOSED' yanked her back to grim reality.

"See you guys," Jonah said. He was through the door, heading for his car.

The lock to the front clacked shut. Bill turned to face her.

*... after we lock up.*

Christina swallowed.

Why did he always look at her like that? Like he wanted to say something but made himself clamp down instead. Those eyes of his were dark with she-didn't-know-what and his fists clenched and released.

He stepped in her direction. Past her. Opened the door to the back and held it.

“Come on.”

*Fuck. You don't have to. Just leave. Don't come back.*

That paycheck sat in her purse, though.

*Fuck!*

Christina stood. Followed.

He didn't stop once they entered the back half, though. The second door swung open to birdsong and highway noise.

“Outside.” His head jerked toward the exit.

Her mouth came open, but he was serious. She suppressed a whine and went.

It was close enough to summer now that daylight still had its say at six o'clock. Shadows hung purple, but the western walls of buildings and trees would be warm and gold a while longer.

Her boss led her around to the back of the main office. A concrete pad extended maybe a yard from the foundation and ran the length of the building. The AC unit sat out there, along with some discarded truck parts that leaned against the back wall. An axle, a front bumper. Something round with a jumble of wires sticking out of it.

There was also a pair of green plastic chairs.

Presumably they were for employees who smoked, but she hadn't seen anyone use them aside from Bill, and that had only been right when she'd started working there. He'd either quit, or just didn't do it at work anymore.

*His clothes don't smell like smoke.*

Christina made and quickly concealed a face at having been close enough to him to know a thing like that, now.

He took one of the chairs and sat, his back almost up against the building. Her legs halted her a couple yards away, refusing to go any further without a command. The man wanted an hour a week? Fine. But she wasn't going to go jumping to it.

He was untucking his shirt. His hands worked open the top button of his pants. When they dropped to his thighs, he looked over at her. Expectant.

Ten thousand worries exploded and started fluttering around in her head. Why not just snag one and blurt?

"I don't think that chair's gonna hold both of us, Bill."

It might have been giddy imagination, but she could almost believe she saw the corner of his mouth turn up in a smile.

"It doesn't need to hold both of us."

She started to cock her head, but then her stomach dropped.

*No.*

His gaze swept her from top to bottom, and he settled back into the chair, knees sprawled wide.

"Go on."

"Seriously?" she said. "Out here?" There was nothing behind the Haul Ash but a creek bed some twenty yards off. Trees. Brush. Probably no one would see, but ...

*No no no.*

Brown eyes made a deliberate move to his lap and then back to meet hers again. The expression on his face never changed. He just waited, the asshole, for her to come do it. Because he knew she would.

The walk to the chair was no more than a few short steps, but somehow Christina crammed each and every one of the five stages of grief into the journey.

*No. No! You can't do this. Not with him, I don't care what the check looks like.*

He watched her come, features neutral.

*Fuck. Fuck you, Bill Marshall!*

A breeze blew at her skirt, flattening it against her thighs as she walked.

*Maybe if I offer him something else? Sex again? Anal? Maybe we go back inside?*

She stopped just in front of him.

*I hate this. Fucking kill me now.*

Came down on one knee. Then the other.

*But you have to. Just do it.*

There it was. That bulge, just staring her down. He'd only undone the top button on what she could now see was a button fly. She'd heard a zipper behind her the last time. Had he worn this pair of jeans instead today, just to make her work for it?

*Pig.*

Her hands rose to the next button, but the shift in position made her wince.

"Bill"—she dared to look at him, her brows collecting in the center of her face—"this concrete ..."

He grunted and unbuttoned his work shirt, starting at the neck. Shrugged out of the sleeves and wadded up the dark blue fabric. Handed it to her.

*You are not getting out of this.*

She stuffed the material under her knees, scant padding that dulled only the worst of the abrading grit.

He still wore his undershirt, but it had a closer fit. Right away, Christina had to run from observations that Asshole Bill was in a lot better shape than his loose work shirts usually gave him credit for. Solid arms and chest stretched white cotton and she needed to be looking somewhere else.

Her fingers went back to working buttons loose. One, two, three more, without any help from her boss, of course. She could've gone without doing the last one, but this was what stalling for time looked like.

His erection was obvious by the time she laid open the halves of his fly, bobbing a crude hello from under plaid boxers. Would it have been more weird or less if he wasn't already hard?

*One less thing for you to do.*

"Take it out."

She jumped a little at the words and felt her face heat. How long had she been staring?

“I know what to do, Bill,” she snapped.

“Yeah?” He sank even further into the chair, the partially unwrapped threat of his groin sliding closer still. “Show me.”

Now it went from the tops of her ears straight down to her chest. There was no way she wasn’t bright red. Bending over and getting fucked was one thing. She could close her eyes. Or look at a table. A wall. It was passive. A thing she just had to endure.

A blow job—especially one where he was sitting—meant she had to perform. She had to choose over and over again to continue eating dick.

*And he’s gonna to watch you do it.*

Her pussy throbbed and she nearly jumped up and ran out of there.

Instead she lifted the waistband of his boxers and pulled it down past her boss’s cock. She let the elastic fit below his balls, which lifted the whole package up to her as a single, vulgar present. He stood up straight, cut and by no means insubstantial. Dark hair made a fine trail from his base on up to what little she could see of his stomach. She felt his thighs flex under her palms.

*Come on. It’s just another dick.*

As her right hand dared to volunteer, though, and wrap around his girth, Christina knew damn well it wasn’t.

He hissed at that first touch, even though he’d been inside her already, and the sound made her heart leap. Facing his reactions this way was not going to help.

An experimental stroke or two, a few tugs to test weight and give were all she had left to buy her time. She reached down and moved the shirt under her knees forward so she could shuffle closer to the unavoidable. Christina steadied him in her grip and laid her tongue to the base of his cock. Refusing to look anywhere else, she rasped him from root to tip, and it was begun.

When she took the head in her mouth and got back a groan that held to the very last threads of control, she saw the fork in the road.

The easy way, the way she wanted to go, was mechanical. Just bob her head and count sheep or something until he shot his load, and then go home. In theory.

But how long would that take? And would he be done with her once he came? Had the hour-a-week clock reset because it was Sunday?

The hard way, the one that curled her lip and made her question her identity, afforded at least one advantage: time. If she sucked his dick like a pro, he couldn't last. The odds of ending this sooner stacked up in her favor.

Christina made a fist around the shaft and fed him into her mouth. He shuddered.

*The hard way, then.*

She gave it to him deep. She gave it to him eager. She let him hear her little noises and feel the hum of her throat down his length.

Her thumb and forefinger made a tight circle against his pubic bone, pulling the skin taut and pointing him at the sky. Her tongue worked like she was cleaning him up for auction, and her left hand joined to tease a handful of his sack.

*In fact ...*

She moved her efforts lower, drawing one of his balls into her mouth. This earned her a growl, and she suckled, stroking him for more.

The male scent of him tickled her nose, along with curling hair. He had the musk of a man who'd worked all day, but no more than that. Somewhere beneath her skirt, that primal cue had her swelling. Growing slick.

*Goddamnit, no.*

But she was way too far down the path now. She took him to the entrance of her throat and held him. Pulled off and did it again. Again. The tacky spit at the back of her tongue lubricated the head, and more was pooling in the valley where his cock joined his balls.

When she rose away this time, she did look at him. Wide eyes, open mouth, so he could watch every inch of himself slide out from between her lips in the early evening light. A thin string of saliva drew out between her

tongue and his glistening cockhead, and she let it hang there for a moment before leaning in to lick it away, never dropping her stare.

The look on his face was priceless. Asshole Bill Marshall with his guard down. Slack-jawed and a slave to his manhood. Deep brown eyes rapt. When he didn't look like he was about to say something blunt, her boss was actually kind of—

*No. Uh-uh. Nope.*

—hot.

Christina dove down for more, under the pretense of having it over with sooner. Telling herself so many lies. She was not, in no way, never could be, sucking this cock because she liked it. Her own sounds came from effort, not arousal. Her pussy weeping had nothing to do wi—

“Stop.”

She blinked.

“Mm?” Looked up at him.

“Stop.”

She pulled back, completely lost.

Self-control had put his every feature back to their normal, inscrutable places. Christina felt something slipping out of her grasp.

“Put your hands behind your back.”

Her heart jerked past a beat without asking.

“W-what?”

“You heard me.”

She did, too. Her whole body heard him. Nipples tightened. Gooseflesh broke out on her thighs, her breasts. Panties felt cool against her lips, too damp now for their own good.

This way, too. Damn this asshole, he was hot this way, too. She'd just never had the context for it.

Her left arm went back, and then her right. She held one wrist in the other. Waited.

Bill inhaled and exhaled at the speed of torture. Stuck his thumbs under the waistband of his jeans, one hand on each hip. Raised a dark brow at her.

“Again.”

Heat flooded between her legs. Christina leaned forward and gave him what he wanted.

It was not such an easy task, with the way dicks tended to point at stomachs, but she got him in her mouth and went back to work. She had no hands to help her now, and there was a lot more bobbing, a lot more play in her neck. The only weapons she had now were suction, tongue, and depth. For about ten seconds, she used them all.

Then there was a hand in her hair. A fist.

She stopped again, mouth full. Raised her eyes. He kept his grip and filled her some more.

This time it was slow. Plumb and draw, no stopping in the cycle. Christina let herself gag when he pushed deep, and watched his jaw tighten in response. This proved an addiction and he began to hold her there longer each time. Her eyes watered.

The noises were obscene.

It had almost crossed some threshold into Too Much, when some dam broke for him. Bill traded his game of suffocation for simple fucking.

She made herself loose and accepted the cock. Let him shove it in her mouth again and again while the fingernails of her one hand bit into the wrist of the other and she knelt for her boss out behind the Haul Ash.

His face went red. Mouth went into a hard line.

The bumping head flared at the roof of her mouth and she felt him kick. He rooted into her throat and swore.

Semen jetted on the back of her tongue. She tried to breathe around the violence of a straining prick, but he was pumping the last of it home and there was nothing to do but choke and mewl until he was finished.

When the fury ended, Christina risked a journey up his chest with her eyes. His lips were parted. Cheeks ruddy. Fingers still laced in her hair, sealing her in the moment.

“Swallow.”



*Jeeesus.*

Christina shivered. Her throat worked him down, once, twice.

If she counted the time with the condom, Bill Marshall had come in every one of her holes, and in not much more than a week.

He let her loose and his cock fell back as she sat up straight. She wanted to break eye contact as he put himself away, and failed in spectacular fashion. Things were getting weird.

Well. Weirder.

She stood and handed him his work shirt. He took it, leaning forward to slip it back on and letting her look away at last. The breath she'd been holding *whooshed* out of her lungs. Her knees ached.

*You gotta get the fuck out of here.*

She squinted into the sunset. Made for the door to the back.

A male grip came around her wrist.

“Wait.”

Christina wasn't sure how much more she could take, but let him pull her beside the chair anyway. Her current stupor wasn't doing her any favors.

Bill reached across himself and his other hand lit on the inside of her knee. The first set of fingers kept its circle on her arm, but the second set crept up her thigh. When he got to her panties, she saw the reason for both hands.

The latter portion of her Fight or Flight instinct kicked in, and Christina jerked against humiliation. Her body had soaked everything beneath her skirt, and Bill Marshall knew it.

Not satisfied with damp fabric, he worked his fingers under elastic and between her swollen lips. She felt a lump in her throat and bit the inside of her cheek. His touch slid, visiting her entrance before tracing up to her throbbing clit.

There was no concealing a gasp when he brushed the frustrated little bundle of nerves. He did it a second time, and a third, as though he needed a larger sample size, just to be sure.

The length of her shadow fell across his lap when he pulled back his hand, but Christina could still see him rub wet fingertips against his thumb.

“Huh.” His eyes flicked up to hers, which were blinking too much.

He let go her wrist.

“Is”—she cleared her throat—“is that it?” The tone of her voice didn’t make it clear whether she was eager to leave or disappointed. None of the bullshit in her head did, either.

Bill gave her a single nod and she was fetching her purse before the door banged shut in her wake.

The Bronco roared out of the lot, stirring gravel behind it, as Christina Lee Dodd ran from her asshole boss and whatever sick shit he was trying to pull.

Everything between her thighs needed relief, and she knew damn well what she was doing the minute she got home.

*Go on.*

*Take it out.*

*You heard me.*

*Swallow.*

She blew through a stop sign and swore.

*What the actual fuck is happening to me?*



Christina closed her eyes and sighed at the futility of it all. Familiarity with the problem could only take her so far. For the rest, she needed infinite fucking patience.

“Can ... can we get rid of the ones on the bottom, Pops?”

Her lashes blinked open to wait for the response from the other room, staring at peeling wallpaper as she stood, her hands sweating inside the latex gloves.

“I want to come in there and see them,” her granddad said.

She bit the inside of her cheek and controlled her breath. “They’re all waterlogged,” she said. “At least ... four inches up. None of ‘em are any good.”

The eighty-seven year old man picked his way in from the kitchen, steadying himself on the towers of junk as he came.

“There’s things I might want to read in there,” he said, gesturing with knobby knuckles at the stacks of newspapers that met him at the chin. “I got to go through ‘em.”

*Patience. Paaatience.*

“I’m not saying get rid of *all* of ‘em, Pops.” She wiped at her brow with the back of an arm. The AC had been broken for at least twenty years. “How ‘bout I just move the top ones off and we let these ruined ones on the bottom go?”

He screwed up his face, staring at the piles and fussing with his hands, the decision hurting him in a way Christina had been trying with all her might to understand for most of her life.

“Here,” she said, getting her fingers under a portion of the nearest stack and hefting it, “let’s just move these over here.”

“All right,” he said, “I guess you’re just going to come in here and do whatever you want with my things, anyway. Just whatever you want.” He’d crafted his tone to instill guilt, but she was holding strong.

“I want you to live somewhere clean, Pops,” she said, shifting armloads of newsprint to expose the moldy, disintegrating strata below. “What if one of these gets knocked down? You’re gonna be stuck, and I’m not gonna know until the next time I come over.”

He was grumbling off toward the back of the house again, bemoaning her lack of respect.

“And they smell,” she called after him, coughing as she unleashed an eye-watering funk.

*Curse of the fucking mummy under this shit. Jeez.*

Christina tried to breathe through her mouth as she worked. Moving piles of ‘good’ newspapers, none of which could have been any newer than five years, to give her access to the unsalvageable mess covering the floor. Not that any of it ought to be salvaged, but modest progress was better than no progress at all.

The lowermost layers might as well have been sludge. There had been heavy rains earlier that spring and, because her granddad’s front door had no seal to speak of along the bottom, the flooding on his front porch became the flooding in his living room.

*‘Living room.’ Pff. Ain’t nobody ‘lived’ in here in—*

“Ah, fuck it.” Christina frowned. She was going to have to do this with a shovel.

The front door was already open to air the place—despite her granddad’s bellyaching—and she went about gathering what she needed. Hauled the trash bin up onto the porch. Stepped through shoulder-high weeds alongside of the house to pick out a shovel from a cluster of several leaning upright there. Squealed and flapped her hands at a dangling spider along the way.

What was worse? Getting paid for sex with her boss, or *not* getting paid for *this*?

Into the afternoon she pitched the remains of the papers of yesteryear into the bin. Her Granddad had come out to the porch to rummage in the

rows of coffee cans lined up on the floor against the front siding of the house. Some of them were full of screws, others full of old keys or chewed up pencils. From the corner of her eye, she could see him, oblivious to the heat in long sleeves and pants, pulling open lid after lid, on some mission only he understood to find God-knew-what.

She loved the old man, but this couldn't go on.

"Hey there, Christina!"

The voice came from the neighbor's yard, and she turned her head, squinting into the slant of sunlight.

"Hi, Carol." She set down the shovel and headed toward her granddad's neighbor, well aware the older woman wouldn't let her get away with a mere 'hello'.

They met where the mostly dead grass of her granddad's lawn met the healthy green next door.

"How you doing today?" Carol was polite to *her*. *She* was trying to fix the problem.

Christina shrugged. "Best I can," she said, glancing back to the porch where Pops had begun on the second tier of cans. "It's slow going."

The woman was holding a spray bottle of weed killer. "Well you done good already," she said, surveying the last week's progress. "Looks about a thousand times better now you got all that junk outta the front yard."

It was true. She twisted at the waist to take in the work she'd done, starting the day after that last court date. Though the lawn was a patchwork of dead grass and weeds, the vast majority of the junk the county had a problem with was gone.

To her endless frustration, a good deal of it had moved to the back yard—under the sweat of her own brow, no less—but at least it was not where people could see it from the street. Instead, there were square yellow patches where a derelict washer and dryer had sat. Homeless, confused bugs were probably blinded by daylight now that their protective pile of warped plywood sheets was gone.

"Yup." She nodded. "At least it's something."

“How’s he like that, uh ... that caregiver you got coming over now? What’s her name again?”

“Denise?” Christina said. “Um ... well ...” She gave the woman a helpless smile.

Carol nodded and had a huff of amusement for her. “Figured as much.”

“He likes his routines. And she won’t let him go anywhere unsupervised, which is irritating him. I told her not to, or he’ll have this yard full of stuff again in no time.”

“Well you’re doing a real good job,” Carol said. “It’s tough livin’ alone. A guy his age.”

“Yeah. It is.” There was a moment of silence in which they both watched her granddad trying his damndest to untangle what had at one time been a ball of twine. These conversations were tedious, if well-intentioned, but Christina needed to disengage.

“Well,” she said, “better get back to it. Only so many daylight hours.”

“Yeah. You’d better.” Not a single hint at an offer to help in any way, Christina noted. Very neighborly. “Good luck.”

Carol hefted the weed killer at her in some sort of mock toast gesture and headed back to her much more civilized looking yard. Back on the porch, her granddad had moved to sorting a rat’s nest of wire coathangers into three different piles, the rhyme or reason behind his choices known only to him.

At least he was doing something. Better than just sitting and complaining, which had become his habit during most of her attempts at cleaning over the last couple years.

“Thanks, Pops,” she said. “Thanks for helping.” Positive reinforcement, right?

“We’re gonna have to let that Debbie woman go,” he said, tugging at a stuck hanger.

“That’s Denise,” she said, “and why are we letting her go this time?” She’d already heard at least half a dozen of his reasons.

“Sugar, I can’t afford to pay that woman.”

“Well you’re not,” she said, closing the lid on the trash bin, “I am.”

He eyed her, forgetting the hangers. “Since when do you have money for things like that?”

As hot as it was outside, she could still feel her face panic and try to go red.

“I got a raise, Pops.” She turned the bin by the handle, fixing to drag it out to the curb. “Now come on. We gotta keep going. Just ‘cause we made it past the first week doesn’t mean we can lay down and do nothing now. Those guys from the county are gonna keep coming by.”

On her way to the street, dragging the weight of reams of damp paper, Christina snorted.

Was this worth it? Sell her body for the opportunity to do thankless, humid work?

*Don’t be like that. He has no one. What are you gonna do, just leave him to the system?*

But what would Bill ask for next? Surely she had limits. How much more pride would he ask her to swallow?

*He didn’t have to ask you more than once, though, did he Christina?*

She shoved the bin off the curb and onto the street and turned to stalk, cursing under her breath, back toward the mess at hand.



Friday was one of the busiest days of the week, and that was just as well for Christina. Everyone was on deck at the Haul Ash: her, Jonah, Travis, and Bill, all clattering doggedly through the day. Bill and Travis were out in the shop, attacking the maintenance pileup, Jonah hopped from customer to customer, helping to attach trailers and load smaller equipment, and for once, Christina relished the length of the call list, because it meant she didn’t have to talk to, or really look at, her asshole boss.

She left yet another voicemail, this time for one ‘Armando Ortiz’, asking him to confirm whether he’d be picking up the twelve-foot truck the next day. People got their hauling done on weekends most of the time, and it was

a careful dance to make sure the rental yard had all the moving parts in the right place at the right time to fill the reservations.

Her shoulder had just cradled the front desk phone under her right ear to call the next customer on the list, when the string of bells clunked at the front door. A man came in wearing a gray porcupine of a moustache and a scowl. He was carrying a chainsaw.

“This thing won’t start,” he said without preamble.

Christina saw the number ‘19’ scrawled down the side of the saw’s casing with white grease pen and her mouth came into a line.

*Goddammit. I told Travis we needed to change that fucking spark plug.*

“I do not doubt that,” she said, hanging up the phone and slipping around the counter. “Let me get you the other saw.” The man handed off the misbehaving tool with a grumbled thanks, and Christina bumped out through the back half. The thing was dripping oil and she cursed under her breath.

The day wore on from there.

By the time she’d gotten through the rest of the phone calls, it might have been two in the afternoon. Most of the pick-ups happened in the morning and now Jonah was folding a pile of cargo blankets, a likely excuse to come into the office and out of the heat, and Bill had commandeered the computer. Christina eyeballed the clock, debating lunch.

“There’s a dog out there.”

“Huh?”

Jonah jerked his chin toward the front windows. “Right there,” he said, “sniffin’ around by the fence.”

And there was. Nose to the ground, some yellow mutt worked its way along the chain link where the lot met the highway, snuffling through the tall weeds.

The counter stool squeaked behind her as Bill swiveled around to look, too. He exhaled through his nose. Stood.

“What are you gonna do?” asked Jonah.

Her boss was already heading through the door. Outside in the sun, he cut a single-note whistle and the dog’s head came up. As soon as those



liquid eyes found a human, the curly tail started wagging and a big canine grin spread over the tawny muzzle. The animal forgot the fence line and trotted over to Bill, tongue lolling.

Christina and Jonah watched as the owner of the Haul Ash took a knee and reached out to the approaching dog. He fended off sniffing and licking to check for a collar, shook his head, and got back to his feet.

The hairy visitor tried to follow him back into the office, but Bill closed the door behind him, leaving the dog panting at them through the glass.

“No collar,” Bill said, rounding the desk again. “Can’t be having strays runnin’ around here.” He scooped up his keys and made for the door again.

“Bill, what are you gonna do?” Clearly, Jonah thought he’d have luck if he asked a second time.

“Take it down to the shelter,” said Bill. “If I’m not back this afternoon, tell Travis we’ll bleed those brakes tomorrow.”

The AC kicked on when he pushed through the door. “Come on, dog.” He slapped his thigh and started toward his truck, the strange mutt happy to go along.

“That dog has to belong to someone,” she said. The beast bounded up into the Ram when Bill opened the door. “Or it *was* someone’s pet at one time. It is not afraid of people at all.”

“Maybe someone’s been to the shelter already looking for it,” said Jonah, folding blankets again while they watched Bill pull onto the highway.

Christina made a face. If no one *was* looking for it, though ...

She sighed and headed out back to let Travis know about the brakes. It was better not to think about the fate of shelter dogs.



Jonah came in through the back half sipping possibly his third cup of coffee for the morning. “Where’s Bill?” he asked, setting the mug on the counter.

“I don’t know,” said Christina. “He hasn’t called yet.”

Asshole Bill was never late. It was quarter past ten on a Saturday, and they opened at seven. She eyed the lot, but a green F-150 was the only thing rolling in to park.

A guy came in, bought a tape gun and two dozen boxes, and left.

“Do you have his phone number?”

Jonah snorted. “Do *you* wanna call him?”

She cocked him a knowing eyebrow. “You just want to stand here and drink your coffee without him giving you any shit. What if something bad happened?”

“If something bad happened, we’ll find out about it.” He shrugged. “We ain’t Bill’s keep—look, there. Never mind, see?”

She followed his line of sight out the windows. The familiar blue Ram came crunching over the gravel, front wheels cutting right to park alongside the office.

“There,” said Jonah, draining the last of his coffee, “now you don’t have to worry about your boyfriend.”

“Gross, Jonah.” Her instinct had her blurting scorn, but the landmine was near and real. She swallowed and shifted on the stool.

*Don’t.*

And then the man of her recent, sweaty nightmares came around the corner. In his wake, an eager yellow dog. Wearing a new collar.

The bells on the door sounded. Bill moved past his employees wearing an impressive scowl, daring either one of them to say a single word. The mutt trotted along behind, a carefree doggie smile splitting its face, and dark brown eyes focused on the one naked monkey it had clearly chosen. The pair disappeared into the back half, wagging tail last.

Jonah and Christina tore their gaze from the closing door and stared at each other. She clapped a hand over her own mouth. He was stifling some sinusy noise that wanted to evolve into a snigger. When she couldn’t take it anymore, she slapped at his arm and wheezed at the lowest volume she could manage.

“Did you fuckin’ see his face?”

Jonah was turning red, and had a fist in front of his mouth. “Shut up. Shut up! He’s gonna come back!”

They tried to sober their expressions, but his lower lip quavered and Christina’s eyes watered. It was no use, and the pair could only start breathing when they heard the back door to the outside close, which meant their sucker of a boss was headed out to the shop.

She couldn’t help a smirk, even as Jonah grabbed a set of keys off the board and left her to the desk.

A goddamned dog.

Proof once again that dogs could charm anyone. Even Asshole Bill Marshall. He could look as cranky as he wanted, that mutt saw right through his bullshit.

*Maybe you ought to ask the dog for advice, Christina Lee.*

She *harrumphed*. Maybe she ought to get back to work.

By the time her lunch break rolled around, the flow of phone calls and customers had scooped the pair out of her head like a mess of pumpkin seeds, and Christina ducked into the back half with nothing more on the brain than filling her stomach and plunking away on some more *Zen and the Art*.

Then there was a bark. And another.

Curiosity won out, because of course it did.

She went to the window on the back wall and pushed slats on the blinds apart with her fingers.

Between the office and the shop was the dog, forepaws out in front of it on the dirt, head low, tail in the air. The mutt kept its line of sight on the adversary, ready to lunge. Stance wide and knees bent, Bill faced off with the animal. The two feinted forward and back in a series of halting charges, with a curly tail about to wag itself right off by the time her boss slapped both thighs to end the game.

The yellow beast fucking *capered* around the owner of the Haul Ash. And where was stoic, Asshole Bill? Bent down to magic his hands all around the furry face, a circus of I’m-not-touching-you, while the dog’s

eyes rolled wild and it snorted with open-mouthed glee trying to catch the flying fingers.

Christina caught herself smiling, and shook her head.

Her boss was scrubbing the blonde coat now, in that sort of fierce petting reserved for healthy, sturdy animals. The kind that agitates their whole hide. He was leaning over. Saying something, but it wasn't his voice. It was a higher pitch than Christina knew, and had almost ... its own rhythm.

Was he ... was he babytalking that dog?

She couldn't make out the words, but that patter was unmistakable. He was. He was talking in a boo-boo voice to some random-ass dog.

Christina let out a *humph* of assessment.

Bill Marshall was a human being. Somewhere in there, he had the ability not to act like a cranky prick. So why? Why did he treat everyone like ...

*Like what? You want him to treat you better? You in a goddamn relationship now?*

Her smile curled down into a sneer and she stepped away from the blinds.

Nope. They were *not* in a relationship. She was a whore, and not even a very good one. Couldn't even compartmentalize this shit. Or did she want to pretend she hadn't driven home last week, the taste of him still in her mouth, and clamped down on her little vibrator until she couldn't feel her fucking toes?

Christina managed about half her sandwich before admitting there was nothing left of her appetite.

At least once she clocked back in, there would be work. Something that made some damn sense. Most of her problem was space in her head. Space for worry. Space for imagined scenarios to cook themselves up into a Thing.

The late afternoon rush filled that space, and part of being grateful was not even being able to slow down enough to realize what for. People came in to drop off equipment they'd needed only for that morning, Jonah buzzed in and out, and Bill blessed them all by finding plenty to do out in the shop.

It wasn't until her shift wound down near four that the arena of her headspace cleared out for her to do battle with her own bullshit some more.

Her boss had made his way inside and was on the computer, scrolling through pages of what appeared to be chain link fence parts on the website of a big box hardware store. What that had to do with the Haul Ash was anyone's guess, but who around there was going to start questioning Bill Marshall's internet usage? Not Christina, that was for sure.

The dog had flopped at the foot of the counter stool, tail *fwapping* the linoleum tiles and eyes surveying the office as though it had been the shop dog for years. It yawned and made that little whistle-squeak at the end, which had Christina smiling again, because reactions to cute animals defied logic.

"We should figure out a name," said Jonah, from behind a broom handle.

"What?" said Bill, eyes still on the monitor. Images of horseshoe-shaped gate closures scrolled down the screen.

Jonah gathered a narrow line of dirt in the middle of the floor and then bent with the dustpan. "For the dog," he said. "We should figure out a name. Like Max, or T-bone, or something."

Christina eyeballed the mutt's coat, the color of dry wheat. "Or Yellow," she said, careless with her own lack of originality.

Bill shot her a look that made no sense at all. Startled? Suspicious? God *damn*, why did he have to set her on edge like that?

Jonah paid no attention. "Yellow? Really?" He emptied the dustpan in the trash. "Might as well name it 'Old Yeller'. How 'bout 'Logan'?"

She snorted. "*I'm* ridiculous, but you want to name it after Wolverine?"

"She's already got a name."

They both shut up as Bill stood, stuffing his wallet into a pocket as he went. The dog was on its feet, as well, making that excited where-we-goin' face, toenails clicking on the tile as it moved out of the way.

"Yeah?" Jonah leaned on the broom. "Well what's her name, then?"

Bill was halfway to the front door, new best friend in tow.

"Daisy."

Jonah and Christina stared bug-eyed at each other as the door fell shut and their boss headed out to his truck without so much as a goodbye.

When she hit the time clock a few minutes later, she was still shaking her head.

*Bill Marshall named his dog 'Daisy'.*

Why was that cute? The man who'd stuffed panties in her mouth and banged her on the bathroom sink wasn't allowed to do things that were cute. There had to be rules. Boundaries. Divisions.

It was nameless modern-day villains like the landlord, the utility companies, who demanded a price. Who wanted a sacrifice in exchange for some other privilege. Not the boss who took in stray dogs and named them after flowers. Who looked hot in his undershirt and told her to swallow.

Christina climbed up into the Bronco and shoved her purse onto the passenger seat. Keyed the ignition and backed out to face the highway.

What were the fucking rules here? Today was Saturday, and he hadn't approached her since last Sunday. Was the week over? Did he forfeit the hour?

Why the fuck did she care so much?



Christina braced for impact.

The time clock announced the start of her Sunday shift with a beep, and Bill glanced up from the computer. She met his eye, ready for it.

‘It’ turned out to be a single raised eyebrow. And silence.

There was no missing her black leggings. You know, the ones hugging her hips where the newly-mandated skirt should be? There was laundry to do, and she hadn’t done it. Several more hours at her granddad’s place after work the previous night had neatly eaten up any time there’d been for that.

She came around the counter to tuck her purse away, and her boss rose and sidled past her.

“Jonah called out,” was all he said as he headed outside. That meant it would be just her and Bill and Travis.

Christina had a blank look for the phone, the stool, and the computer. *Well? Just get to work then.*

Whatever she thought of his pointed glance and complete lack of comment, it was nothing compared to her irritation with her own reactions. After an hour on the clock, she couldn’t stop the grimace on her face each time he passed through the office. After two, she couldn’t prevent her body from taking mincing steps around the counter, from trying to make itself small and inconspicuous, as though he would forget.

Inconspicuous? Hell. The way the matter went rampantly unaddressed might as well have set up a big, throbbing neon sign. A giant red arrow pointing right at her lower half.

*From now on, you wear skirts or dresses. No pants.*

But he had nothing to say. At least not about that.

*He’s not freaking out about it; why are you?*

The phone rang, and Christina about peed her forbidden pants.

*You gotta calm down. And focus.*

“Thank you for calling Haul Ash Truck and Trailer, this is Christina, how may I help you?”

And Sunday went on, whether she could handle it or not.

By the time a couple more hours of customer-servicing had sliced and diced her anxiety down into manageable bits, the clock had eaten up the entire first half of her shift.

Christina hunched at the table in the back half, emptying a foil pack labeled ‘Beef Flavor’—a designation that raised more questions than it answered—into a steaming bowl of ramen noodles. The clunk and swing of the outside door interrupted her stirring.

Bill took only a flicker of a glance in her direction as he headed to the sink and started scrubbing down his hands. Why he hadn’t just used the sink out in the shop was beyond her. Out of soap maybe? But that wasn’t what made her cock her head.

“Where’s Daisy?”

“Mm?” He grunted, shutting off the tap and twisting his neck to look back while he pulled paper towels out of the dispenser.

“I said, where’s your dog?”

“Runnin’ around my yard.” And why couldn’t she stop staring at the way the muscles of his forearms moved as he twisted the towels through his hands? “Had to fix my front gate last night,” he said, “so she wouldn’t get out.”

That explained why the dog had been at the office the day before. Christina had a forkful of noodles halfway to her mouth. “So you’re not going to bring her to work anymore?”

He tossed the paper in the trash and turned to face her. By the day, it became more difficult to maintain direct eye contact with her boss. She swallowed. His mouth turned up into something that was almost not a scowl. “Maybe I’ll bring her in,” he said, after way too much time making her heart beat faster. “Sometimes.”

A smile. It was nearly a smile.



Bill left her for the front office. The noodles on her fork were cold.

*Fuck. What even is this now? This asshole knows what he's doing. Fuck him.*

But she had already done that, hadn't she?



Bill had no idea what he was doing.

Was she fucking *flirting* with him? Asking about his dog? And look at his dumb ass, trying to get a smile out of her.

*You're an asshole. That's not what this is. She just likes the dog. Everybody likes dogs.*

"Bill." Travis came through the front office door twirling keys around a finger.

"Yeah."

"That guy returned the sixteen footer with almost no gas in it."

Bill snorted. "It's his credit card bill. You gonna fill it up?"

"Well, unless you wanted me to get started on that mower out there."

He'd forgotten about the mower. "Yeah, fuck." Bill got up from the stool. "You go deal with that. I'll handle the truck."

"All right." Travis slid him the key across the counter and headed for the back half. "Hey, you not gonna bring that dog of yours with you anymore?"

He nodded. "I might; I might."

"Kinda fun to have a dog around," said Travis, as he disappeared into the back.

*See? Everybody likes the dog.*

There it was, right there. He had to stop analyzing every word she said to him now like it had some kind of hidden meaning.

The bells on the front door clanked as he pushed his way outside into the sunlight. The sixteen footer was parked on the west side of the building, in front of the shop.

Just because she'd made those little noises when he'd grabbed her hair didn't mean she was flirting now. Those blue eyes looking up at him with her pretty lips around his cock. Just because her pussy had been wet when

---

*You know that doesn't mean a goddamn thing.*

Bill slammed the truck door shut behind him and fired it up. Put it in reverse.

But come on! Nothing? It meant *nothing* for her to be wet? For him to see her breath hitch when his fingers slid under her panties?

He bumped out of the lot and took a right, heading toward the gas station.

No. No one flirted with her boss after he shoved his dick down her throat and forced her to swallow his load. *For money.* End of story.

But she ...

No. He could settle this. Take himself right out of the equation. Then whatever was or wasn't going on could be more obvious. Maybe.

He pulled the truck up alongside the pump, and killed the engine.

And her coming in wearing those tights, or black pants, or whatever the hell they were ... Christ. Forget that he'd told her to wear skirts. He could see every curve. Was she doing this *to* him, or had he done it to his own damn self?

When he went inside to pay, Bill made a conspicuous effort to look everywhere but at the cigarettes for sale behind the counter.



"Okay, that's gonna be \$182.39," Christina said. The man on the other side of the counter slid her a ratty Visa card. "Can I see your I.D., please?"

He thumbed open his wallet without a word, showing her a Texas driver's license with a name matching the credit card.

"Thank you," she said, and swiped the plastic for the sale.

“Do you have a trash can back there?” The guy shook a lidded fast food cup with a straw, empty except for ice, while his receipt printed.

“Sure do.” She reached for the cup and made a face. The outside was sticky with soda, and she tossed it in the trash under the counter. “Can you sign here, please?”

Christina pushed the credit card signature slip and a pen his way with her clean hand. He signed, she thanked him, and the man was on his way, one drop hitch heavier.

She stuck her tacky left thumb and forefinger together an experimental couple of times. “Ugh.”

This needed soap. A glance out the front windows told her there were no other customers parked in the lot. She hopped down from the stool and shouldered her way through the door to the back ha—

“*Jesus Christ, Bill!*” Christina stopped short just on the other side of the door and caught all the scattering pieces of her heart. “I didn’t realize you were right there.”

Her boss, not two feet in front of her, fixed Christina with a look that could pin butterflies to museum boards. With the cool confidence of a pro poker player, she had no trouble meeting his eyes. And stammering. Like an idiot.

“I, uh ...” Her right hand grabbed up her left to fidget before remembering it was sticky. “I thought you were out gassing up that truck.” Where was Travis? Some small throat clearing on her part, but Bill took a step in her direction. “I ... guess you’re back, though.”

*Dumbass. You’re in his way. He just wants to get by.*

She made to sidestep, but—*omigod*—Bill was right there, palm coming to the door, just alongside her ear. Her shoulder blades bumped into wood and—*holyshit*, closer!—he was coming closer, and Christina was going to have a goddamned heart attack.

She could have ducked out of the way, but fear, or confusion, or some other stupid shit she didn’t want to think about had her paralyzed there against the door. And against Bill. It was like a cargo ship running into a dock: an excruciating lack of speed, but unstoppable momentum. The space

between them shrank and shrank and then was gone; his chest brushing hers, a knee between her thighs.

*Ohfuckohfuck.*

Her mouth had to have come open as she looked up at him. Brown eyes, ever serious, had her swallowing to wet her throat. And then there was a hand on her hip. A thumb playing along the bone there, as they went from zero to more-than-she-could-handle in the blink of an eye. In the new, tight proximity, she could feel the rise and fall of her own chest. The whisper of his breath.

“This ain’t a skirt,” he said.

*Sonofa ...*

His touch took liberties with the incriminating black fabric.

*Rrrgh! These stupid leggings! You knew it was gonna be a problem!*

There was nowhere to backpedal. Christina spoke to his Adam’s apple while shifting against the thigh between hers, like they were in the middle of a fucking two-step. “I’m sorry, Bill.”

And was he ... getting ... fucking *hard*?

*Goddamn disaster.*

“I know you said no pants,” she rambled on, “but I haven’t had a chance to do laundry this week. Everything’s dirty, and tonight was the first night I could ge—”

A palm brushed up under her shirt and her words caught. Fingers found her waistband. Slipped past it, wrist turning in reverse so his touch could slide along her belly.

*Oh god.*

Lower to the crease where her thigh met her body, a work-roughened hand slid with its own agenda.

*Ohgodohgod.*

Gentle as a sigh over two soft lips, no panties in the way today. Not under leggings.

“Yeah?” He issued the tiniest bit of a challenge. Dipped his fingers where she was slick. “*Everything’s dirty?*”

*Fuuuuuuck.*

At the breath she inhaled, unsteady and telling, Bill Marshall settled in, his weight on the palm supporting him against the door, and began to demonstrate just how dirty he thought she might be.

This was trouble.

He wasn't demanding she stand still for this; hadn't closed her in a room. And Christina wasn't going anywhere. Her eyes had ventured up to settle on his mouth while a fingertip traced the seam between her legs. His hand cupped her mound and she didn't cringe or squirm sideways.

Real trouble.

Christina exhaled and shifted into his touch. Did this count toward their hour this week?

Did it matter?

There was a nudge and—*oh!* He was inside her, finger slipping up into an embarrassing amount of wet for someone who thought her boss was a colossal prick. And still, she stood there. Even as he pressed in and out, experimental in his movements, and some weird nostalgia swept her back to high school, where she'd run off to find a hidden spot between two buildings and let an awkward teen boyfriend try and fail at fingering her.

Only Asshole Bill wasn't failing.

"Christina, look at me."

*Dear god.*

It took all she had. When her lashes lifted, she could see that nothing good was going to come out of this. Nothing good at all.

Those fucking eyes of his held her in place. That deep, dark brown told her he wanted something, but not what, and she was empty, and then much fuller.

Two fingers. A firmer push until knuckles pressed up into her body and she couldn't look anywhere else. The pad of his palm ground down between her lips and over her clit, pressing, circling. Christina almost choked on her own gasp, but let her ankles shuffle ever so slightly wider apart, instead.

The corner of her boss's mouth ticked up at this, nearly imperceptible. If not for the matching glitter of heat narrowing dark eyes down at her,

Christina never would have recognized it for what it was: a smile. It was Spartan and tightly-controlled, but searing and ... and *genuine*. Everything from her core on out all but vibrated to it like some unfair tuning fork, and she felt more of her shame come weeping around the stretch of his fingers.

This was ridiculous.

Her eyelids drifted shut on slow strokes, lazy grinding.

She *wanted* this.

Her throat constricted and made a whiny noise. Throbbing flesh eased into the cup of a hand.

She. Wanted. Bill. To fucking touch her pussy.

“I said look at me.”

Christina’s eyes snapped open to reality.

She was full and ripe under her boss’s touch. Dripping honey while he teased and tested her sensitive flesh. Scared shitless while he trapped her gaze with his and violated her just out of the sight of customers. Again.

When Christina had touched herself, she could control every bit of how hot this would be. There was no control over it now. Her palms splayed against the door behind her—she had no idea what else to do with them.

*And where the fuck is Travis? He could come walking in here any minute!*

Fingers slipped from her, only to rise and scrub at the stiff little bead of her clit. Her breath came through her mouth now. Her hips were trying to roll, if they could sneak it past all her rational thinking that screamed what a bad idea this whole mess was.

The hum was building to a fever pitch, and Bill leaned in, brows coming down in his focus. His jaw shifted past her temple and he pressed close; their eye contact snapped like a steel cable.

*Oh fuck me, he ...*

Forearm worked against her belly.

He *smelled* good. Why?

Fingertips refined their movements. Smaller. Faster. More precise. Christina bit off a moan.

Why did he have to smell good? Probably just deodorant, but it had her wanting to wrap her legs around him an—

Flutter. A Flash, a rumble of sensation. A threat.

*No!*

A twitch of a hand and the pulse built. Eyes started to roll back. Christina was going to c—

Stopped. Everything stopped.

Her breath, her heart.

Bill.

He was pushing himself away from the door, hand sliding from her leggings to leave a wet trail over her mound. Cool air curled in between them, and Christina blinked at him, open-mouthed.

“Bill!” she hissed.

*The fuck is he doing?*

Mini-cowbells clanked from the front office, and Christina swallowed a yelp.

He dove in like a predator, palm cupping her, unfulfilled, over her leggings, mouth mere inches from hers.

“Next time,” he said, tracing the damp of her sex through fabric, “wear a skirt.”

And then he was herding her away from the door. Slipping past to the customer who’d just set the bells jangling.

Christina stood there trying to breathe, nerves ready to snap. The front of her shirt disheveled.

*Did he just ...*

Had Bill just ... *punished* her for wearing pants? By denying her an orgasm?

*Was I wanting Asshole Bill to make me come?*

She eyed the bathroom door, slightly ajar. Would it be wrong if she ducked in there and finished this off?

*And there’s your answer, Christina Lee.*

What *was* this fucked up shit? This was supposed to be a dirty deal with a man she tolerated at best. He was paying her so he could get off. Whatever just happened right now? That hadn't been for him. That had been her just standing there *enjoying herself*, and Bill ... making her ... feel ...

“Rrrggh!”

And her hand was still sticky. She'd never made it to the sink.

Christina scrubbed for the next few minutes, but none of it made her feel clean.



A drop of oil splattered onto Bill's hairline and he swore beneath his breath. There was almost no way to back one of these oil plugs out of there without getting it all down your hand, but he was going to have it coming down all over everything else if he didn't start paying attention.

But after yesterday, who the fuck could pay attention to anything?

He pushed with his boots to scoot the creeper he was lying on a couple inches further under the truck. The hard little wheels made a gritty sound on the concrete floor.

He'd wanted to see her come so goddamn bad.

The common factor, every time so far, had been the sounds. All those little whimpers and gasps she couldn't keep contained. Didn't matter if he was using her body or teasing it. Hearing her every time? He wasn't going to be able to keep it together.

A final twist and the plug clunked down into the pan, black, spent oil pouring out after it. Bill pulled out the messy, threaded little thing and turned it this way and that, looking for shards. None yet. He nodded to himself and dropped it back in the pan.

Jonah and Travis were cleaning out a truck in the other bay and he could hear the soles of their shoes chuffing the cement. A vacuum going. The air compressor kicking on.



Bill slid out from under the sixteen footer, and shoved the creeper out of the way with a distracted kick. A flimsy orange box with the new oil filter already sat on the top of the radiator, under the open hood. He could change it out while this thing drained.

And now he knew ... something, anyway.

He tossed the old filter and it made a hollow *thunk* in the trash.

Christina did *not* hate him touching her. He'd watched her face, her body language, like a hawk, looking for the slightest wince or trace of awkward stiffness. But no. She'd tilted her hips for him. Spread herself wider. Flushed cheeks ... Bill didn't think that was something people could fake. No fucking panties on. Sweet Jesus.

*You better take it easy or you're gonna be changing this filter with an erection.*

Clean oil poured in a golden ribbon from the bottle into the new filter. Just enough. There.

And she'd been pissed—pissed!—when he'd left her hanging. It had been the last thing he'd wanted to do but, well ... he'd more or less found out what he wanted to know by that point. Bill had approached her in a way that had excluded himself. There had been nothing in it for him, at least not physically. It had all been about her: *her* body, *her* reactions, *her* pleasure ... No need to pretend to like it for his sake. No, no pretending at all ...

*Fuuuck.* Bill did a quick recon to make sure neither of the other guys were paying attention and adjusted his prick through his jeans. *Go back to sleep, you.*

"Bill," Jonah said, "What happened to the orange extension cord?"

"Uhh ... that's a good question." The filter threaded into place. "If we kept this place clean, we'd probably know where it was."

"Fuck." Jonah went muttering off around the back end of the other truck. "It's gotta be here somewhere."

There was no way Bill could have let her come, though. Not right then and there. He only had control over himself—questionable at best—not Christina, no matter what kind of front he put on to keep her nerves on edge and him with the upper hand. She could be a screamer for fuck's sakes—

who knew she'd even get that far? Travis could have heard. A *customer* could have heard. It was only his having been slightly more aware than her at the time to have heard the gravel in the parking lot crunching. He'd ended it just before they might've been caught.

*Listen to you. Like a fuckin' teenager.*

Customers, whatever. Jonah or Travis finding out? Bill grimaced. Better not to poke that anthill if he could avoid it. He took a knee again to check on the glossy black thread still drizzling into the oil pan. There was almost nothing left of it.

And speaking of things he ought not to be poking at work ...

Here came Christina now, squinting into the sun as she made her way from the back of the office over to the shop. His warning to wear a skirt 'next time' must have hit home, because today dark blue fabric swung around her knees again. It might even be ... yeah, it looked like the same dress she'd worn that very first time. He could see it draped over the edge of the table. Bunched at the small of her back, and he pulled her pants—

*Stop! For the love of—*

"Hey, Travis," she said, stopping just inside the roll-up door to the other bay.

"Yeah." Bill could hear him from the other side of the truck. He was back on the creeper, threading the plug in place.

"There's a guy on the phone, says you told him he could keep that car hauler one more day, and we wouldn't charge him?"

"Uh, no?" Travis said, sounding like his head was in the cab of the other truck. Bill rolled out again and stood, fetching another bottle of oil.

"Well he said you told him that. Like, he knew your name. His name is Aaron? Adam? Something?"

"Oh, *that* guy?" Jonah chimed in, stepping into sight. He pulled a long swallow off a bottle of water.

"I did *not* tell him that," Travis said, voice clear again. "That guy's a pain in the ass. I told him there would be an extra charge. He's trying to pull some shit."

Christina made a face. Bill wanted to smooth it out. Nothing should bother her. Ever. Except him.

“All right,” she said, that weariness oh-so-native to the realms of Customer Service tinting her words. “I’ll tell him again.” The skirt swirled behind her as she headed back to do battle. Bill imagined himself biting a knuckle and leaving teeth marks.

The back door to the office swung shut and Bill set the first quart to funneling while he looked for a rag.

“What’s it been? Two, three weeks now?” Jonah said.

“For what?” The sound of Travis’s voice was headed toward the far side of the shop, now.

“Dodd, comin’ in here in all those skirts.” Bill’s attention snapped around, a guarded eye following Jonah. “You think she’s talking to someone?”

Travis snorted, out of sight. “The fuck should I know?”

Jonah was on a roll, though, male one-upmanship simmering. “I’m about to start dropping tools around here,” he said, “see if she’ll bend over and get ‘em for me.” Bill’s pulse hammered, but Jonah was oblivious, snickering. “I got a ‘tool’ she can bend over for.”

“Hey.” Two faces whipped toward the bark of his voice. The owner of the Haul Ash rounded the truck, wiping oil off his hands with angry swipes of a red shop rag. “You gonna talk that shit? Talk it about someone else.” Two pairs of eyes blinked at him. “She’s your co-worker. We’re not gonna do that shit here.”

His employees exchanged uncertain glances. “Um ... okay, Bill,” Travis said while Jonah gave Bill the kind of slow nod you’d give a drunk friend—the one brandishing a curtain rod like a sword—before backing slowly out of the room.

“It’s disrespectful,” Bill said, hefting the rest of the case of oil and dropping it on the ground in front of the truck with a thud. He didn’t need to glance their way again to know the guys were looking at him like he’d grown a second head. Hell, he’d probably earned it.

*‘Disrespectful.’ You’re the biggest hypocrite alive, Bill Marshall.*

But what did any of this have to do with respect? Was she his fucking girlfriend now? No. She'd *agreed* to this. Agreed to take his money.

*Listen to yourself! So you own her now? Is that it?*

Because there was only one other reason to start getting possessive, and that w—

“Bill!” Christina hollered, her upper body leaning out the back door to the office.

He coughed once. Called back: “Yeah.”

“This guy wants to talk to a manager.”

*Oh, for ...*

“All right, I'll be right there.” He tossed the rag onto the workbench and the empty filter box in the trash. “One of you guys finish putting oil in this truck.”

*You need to cool off for a while. This was supposed to be a transaction.*

Neither Travis nor Jonah said a word as Bill headed back toward the office.

That was the problem, though. It had never been a transaction. Those were just the lies he kept telling himself, so he could keep letting it happen. He knew the flavor of those lies all too well. They usually sounded like, “I'll just have *one* cigarette today. After supper.”

And he didn't think there was enough room left on his wallet to write “IF YOU GET EMOTIONAL OVER CHRISTINA LEE DODD I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU.”



The red dress Christina wore on Monday was a flag in front of a bull. It was the only long one he'd seen her in, and the length of it dropped to skim her ankles in a flowing scarlet dare. Not to mention the fabric falling over the swell of her ass like something that ought to be illegal.

Bill couldn't even stay in the front office with her. It was too much, after Saturday. He made sure he had plenty to do in the shop, or chances were, he was going to do something stupid. Whatever the opposite of discreet was, he was going to do that if he stood within arm's reach.

Two o'clock sunlight baked everything outside the dual-bay steel building, and Bill let the heat soak into him through the open roll-up doors. He could have turned on one of the big box fans, but working while just this side of too hot was almost like some sort of weirdly appropriate, self-imposed punishment for his generally acting like an idiot.

Bill stood at the workbench nearest the side door and ran his finger down the maintenance list he'd made. Checked off that oil change he'd done yesterday, and eyed the next thing. Should be quick.

Well. Maybe not so quick. Not if he couldn't keep his head on the task at hand.

It looked like it was made out of the same sort of material as a tee-shirt, that fucking dress. Maybe softer. She wore some tiny, thin sweater over it that really wasn't much more than a pair of sleeves. Probably trying to put up with the blasting AC, but it was just as well he couldn't see her shoulders. It was bad enough her hair was up off her neck.

Not that he was blaming Christina. She was just doing like he asked, wearing a dress. Wasn't her fault his dick was acting like a kid begging for candy at a grocery store check-out stand.

*Please! Pleeeeease can I have some? Just one! You promised!*

So much for ‘cooling off’.

The only thing different than before their ‘arrangement’ was Bill knew he could have it now. If he wanted it.

And, by god, he did.

He wanted to touch, to hear, to *smell* her. He wanted to see the face she would have made if he’d kept going the other day, even for ten more seconds. That stitch in her brow, teeth sinking into the pink of her lower lip ...

Bill fumbled the jug of coolant he was pulling down from a steel shelf and swore. He had it rescued before it hit the ground, but still. It never paid to be distracted. Even now, when he had a job where it wouldn’t be a huge problem.

*You’ve already got a huge problem, Marshall.*

Right. And it wasn’t the truck in the near bay with the coolant leak.

There were reasons people called him an asshole. Usually not to his face, but folks didn’t always pay attention to who was standing nearby when they ran their mouths.

He didn’t like the fake feeling of ‘small talk’ and extraneous fluff. Pointless greetings, the placation of ass-kissing. People called that ‘blunt’. He wouldn’t tolerate lies or bullshit. He’d put his finger right on the nose of what was really going on. People called that ‘harsh’. He had zero patience for idiots. He would not wait around, he would not bite his tongue. People called that ‘being an asshole’.

Maybe he was. But that had nothing to do with running an equipment rental shop. Other people could take their opinions of him and calmly insert them three knuckles deep.

Christina didn’t expect him to act any other way, though. At least she seemed not to. He didn’t see that telltale disappointment on her face when he ended a useless conversation. She never bothered to try coaxing forced ‘good mornings’ out of him. In so many small ways, she allowed him to be himself.

There were parts of him surfacing now around Christina, however, that Bill Marshall didn’t know what to do with.

He was ... aggressive. Making demands.

*Move your feet apart. Hold still. Swallow. Look at me.*

Bill's jaw tightened. It wasn't the commands. It was her *obeying* him. Those blue eyes wide and wary, asking 'What else? What else will he want me to do?' and braving it anyway.

This was dangerous. She fed into the part of him that wanted to flex power. How much did he have? How far would she let him go? It could be a drug, testing those limits, and keeping the fuck away from cigarettes was already enough of a chore. Bill was already far too familiar with the ways power could keep a person from seeing straight.

Speaking of seeing ... Coolant refilled on the twelve-footer, he lowered himself almost to the ground to peer underneath the truck. The couple of drips were still there on the concrete, reminding him of the leak, but he was not going to change that hose out today. Didn't even think he had one the right size at the shop right now. He *would* need to get one ordered, though.

Bill stood and dusted his palms off on his jeans. He eyeballed the office. That's where he'd have to go at some point. Get this radiator hose added to a PO.

But *she* was in there.

*Goddamnit, which one of you is running this show? You scared of her now?*

Maybe. A little. Scared of what he might become around her. Of how this whole thing was going to end.

Today was Monday, though. A new week. A new hour.

And Bill was greedy. He knew what he wanted this time.



Christina exhaled through puffed cheeks, consulting the clock on the computer for the hundredth time in the last hour. Today was dragging ass.

Hardly any customers on a Monday, and cutting the week's pos had taken almost no time at all. She'd scraped away at all the mundane busywork she

could find, but the last half hour of her shift was stretching away like a funhouse hallway, just out of reach forever.

Jonah wasn't even pretending to work. He leaned on the end of the counter, scrolling with a thumb through something on his phone. She swiveled on the tall stool and refreshed the Haul Ash email inbox. Again. Still nothing new.

And Bill could not have made the day more awkward. He'd spent most of it in the shop, but whenever he managed to pass through the office, Christina stopped being able to function as a human being.

He came in the door, she'd drop a roll of receipt tape. He needed something behind the counter, she'd start making typos. He asked her a question, she'd scramble syllables in her answer like she was trying to have a stroke.

It might have been less flustering without all the staring. She'd catch him, every time he'd come in, at least once. Glance up and Bill's eyes were on her, their focus intense. He'd look away as soon Christina noticed, but it was enough to keep her unbalanced for most of the day.

She minimized all the windows on the monitor. Maximized them all again. Restless. Fucking around.

Why'd he have to make it like this? All *weird*. Avoiding her all day only to stir chaos with his every appearance. Why couldn't he just ... do things that made sense? Just haul her by the arm into the back bathroom and—

*And what? Bend you over again? Fuck you? You want it, don't you, Christina.*

She frowned, shifting on the seat. At least if things went back to how they were in the beginning, she would know where she stood. Christina the Fucktoy was a lot easier to get her head around than Christina panting while Asshole Bill's fingers brought her almost, almost ...

*Fuck, I want him to touch me.*

She might as well have pulled out an Ouija board and summoned the fucker with that thought, because here he came, too.

"Jonah, you ain't got nothing to do, I'll find something for you." The front door settled shut behind their boss to the dull clunk of bells.



Jonah pocketed his phone and stood up away from the counter. No one wanted the kinds of jobs the owner of the Haul Ash 'found' for bored employees. "I'll deal with the trash," Jonah said, leaning down to grab the bin. Smart move on his part.

"Christina?"

She looked over at her boss, wary. "Yeah?"

"Your front tire's low." He came around the counter to hang up two sets of keys, his proximity waking up the pace of her heartbeat.

"Which one?" Christina said to the monitor. She didn't want to turn around on the stool, as if facing him was going to spring some trap.

*Whatsa matter, Dodd? You don't wanna get caught?*

"Driver's side," he said. "When you clock out, go ahead and pull it up in front of the shop and we'll get it filled."

He was headed out through the door to the back half before she could say 'Okay'.

'Get it filled.' Forget springing a trap. He'd poked a hornet's nest, and her mind flew in every direction.

Since when did Bill care about anyone's tire pressure? Since never, that's when. Christina knew what this was, and she knew in twenty more minutes she'd be out there fighting for her sanity against whatever torture her boss had planned for her next.

*If it bothers you so much, why don't you just ... get out? Tell him you're done. Leave.*

But ... 'bother' probably wasn't the right word. Terrify? Hypnotize? This asshole was calling her out like the fucking Pied Piper and there wasn't even a question. Christina was going to go.

'Seduce.' That was the word. Whoever thought *that* word would happen in the same hemisphere as Bill 'Next Time Wear A Skirt' Marshall?

Another glance at the clock. Ten minutes. She'd been spazzing out about it for that long. Jonah was already bringing in the other small, tied-off trash bag from the back half. He hefted both bags now and pushed his way outside, heading around to the side of the office to toss them in the larger dumpster.

Christina hopped off the stool and started tidying the counter area. Dropped a couple stray pens back in their cup. Straightened piles of papers, moved a business card and brochure holder back into place. Anything to distract.

Her shift ended an hour before closing tonight. Jonah's didn't—he closed. That meant she'd be out in the shop trying not to have a nervous breakdown while her co-worker was still here. She could only pray Bill's stern mandate that someone *always* be watching the counter was enough to keep Jonah chained to the office. That whole 'fear of being caught' thing did nothing for Christina. Other people could go be exhibitionists. Not her.

The time clock didn't give a single fuck about Christina's mental health. When she looked again, it was time.

*Fuck.*

Jonah made his return through the door to the back half. "Lucky you, time to go home," he said. That hint of routine bitterness on his voice told about his excitement for the last hour of his shift.

Christina swallowed. What was she going to do? Procrastinate? For what reason would she not boogie right out of here when her shift ended? Especially on a sleepy day like this. It would look weird to do anything but pick up her purse and clock out.

So she did.

"See you, Jonah."

"Later," he said to her back as she pushed through the front door.

The amber light of near sunset warmed her arms, even as her lower back went cold, and Christina stepped out onto the concrete like she was walking a plank.

*Here goes.*

She headed around to the Bronco, squinting. *Hmm.* The front tire on her side *was* low. If the guy was making up excuses, at least he found one that was legit.

Purse shoved onto the passenger seat, Christina fumbled her keys trying to get the right one into the ignition. The truck behaved itself and backed up like she wanted, and rolled over the gravel and onto the concrete pad in

front of the one open bay. When she opened the door to get out, she could already hear the tinny pneumatic purr from the compressor.

Bill stood in the roll-up doorway, twisting a nozzle onto the hose. Instinct made her want to walk over to him—it seemed rude to just stand by the truck—but he'd be coming over in a few seconds to deal with the tire, so she just hovered near the driver's side headlight, fussing with a hangnail.

The compressor hose made a dry *shush* over the cement as he dragged it toward the Bronco. "Thanks," she said, as her boss took a knee.

He had the valve stem cap off and the square plastic core popped out of the pressure gauge. "Yeah, that's low," he said.

*Thank you, Captain Obvious.*

The tire grew upright out of its bulge while Christina watched, Bill saying nothing, and the nozzle making its *pffffft* of air once he wrangled it loose. Tiny black cap screwed back on, he stood. The compressor rattled back into silence.

"Thanks."

*Really? Is that your only word of English? Jesus Christ, are you awkward.*

Her boss was already coiling the hose back up, hanging it neatly on its rack, because there was no way Bill Marshall was going to tolerate it just flung in a pile on the shop floor. And god help Travis or Jonah if they left it that way.

Christina made a tentative step sideways and glanced around the lot while Bill hauled on the chain loop and brought the roll-up door clattering down along its track. When it met the ground, she bit her lip and turned to eye the Bronco.

Maybe he really did just want to get her tire filled, and that was it. She was losing her fucking mind reading into things anymore.

*He's in the shop, he probably has shit to do. Not every comment is some hidden invit—*

"Christina." Bill stepped around the side of the shop.

Something thudded in her chest and then leapt to top BPMS. *And that, my friends, is the sound of the bass dropping.*

“Yeah.” Like it was any old thing, coming next.

He jerked his head back the way he’d come. “Come on.”



She knew. There was no way she didn’t know.

And she came anyway, following him around the shop to the side door, ducking into the dim space for Bill to shut them in and slide the bolt home.

Christina stood there, feet right next to each other, arms hugging her middle in that way of a person trying to make themselves small. Ruddy sunset light filtered through the windows just under the ceiling on the opposite wall, setting the tip of her nose, her cheekbones, and a halo of stray lines of blonde hair aglow.

Bill wanted to tear into her like a birthday present.

*Calm down. Or you’re gonna fuck this up.*

In place of acting like an animal, he stepped up beside her and touched fingertips to her lower back. She started and her head snapped to one side to show him a wary eye, but he kept his touch sliding around to her elbow, nudging as he moved past her into the shop.

“Come here.” He didn’t need to put any volume into his voice. The air in the space sat still and heavy, warm from the late afternoon, and silent other than the whisper of passing cars from outside.

Bill made it to the shop bench and looked back to see her rooted in place, blinking at him. He could never tell from one day to the next whether she was terrified of him or aroused. Or disgusted?

*Let’s hope not.*

He angled his head in a less curt gesture than before; a suggestion for her to join him, not a barked order. It warred with everything in his nature that had no time for the handling of people with kid gloves.

Christina looked at her shoes for a moment and he saw her chest rise and fall with a breath. Then she let go her arms and moved the few steps to stand in front of him. Close enough for a handshake.

*Be patient. You're the one with the plan. At least until it all goes to hell.*

"Come sit on the bench."

Her mouth came into a line, but she made to do like he asked, shoving a shop stool a few inches out of the way to make room. Until her palms landed on the surface.

"There's all kinds of crap all over it."

*Yeah, because it's a fucking workbench.*

But he kept his mouth shut and grabbed a rag. She didn't want to get her dress dirty, that was fair. Bill swiped at the space he'd cleared, brushing away most of the dust and filthy little bits of god-knew-what.

She ran her hand over the area in his wake and made another little face, but sidled in between him and the bench. The heels of her palms went back to the edge and she hoisted herself up to perch there, ankles crossed.

Followed him into the shop, sat up here like he wanted: it was going smoother than Bill had hoped.

*Don't forget the money, though. Still a good reason for her not to argue.*

But maybe today he would find out.

Giving her no time to balk or shift elsewhere, Bill melted into Christina's space. His hand insinuated her knees apart and his hips slipped between her thighs. Her feet came unlinked and the fabric of her dress stretched across his belt.

All that tight composure fled as he invaded her little bubble. She had a hand on the work surface behind her, putting her weight on it to lean back even an inch from whatever he had in mind.

There was a button fastening her sweater, and Bill already fumbled it in his fingers. When it came apart, he was sluicing the flimsy thing off her shoulders before it dawned on him there were sleeves, and they were going to make things difficult.

"Take this off."

She did, and it should have been hot. Stripping out of her clothes, however, came second to the depth of blue eyes locked on his as she did it. To her jaw gone slack.

They meant something, these responses of hers, but Bill had only a repeating tune in his head and no words. Like the name of a song he couldn't extract from memory, aside from the uncanny feeling it would be so obvious once he did, he'd want to slap himself.

As soon as she pushed the pile of knit material away behind her, Bill's hands were gliding along her forearms. Her shoulders. Smooth like the rest of her, and he was going to have to hit the brakes before he crashed.

The top of the dress had narrow straps, and they lay alongside two more that belonged to her bra. It wasn't a fancy outfit. He could see her wearing it to a barbeque. But that red against her pale skin ... so much *skin*.

His thumbs flanked the column of her throat while he all but licked her collarbones with his gaze. He wanted everything.

His fingers moved under the straps and he shifted closer, breathing her in, shampoo and woman and home.

"You tryna fuckin' kill me with this dress, Christina?"

Her brows came together like it was a trick question. "N-no?"

Bill almost chuckled. "Coulda fooled me." And slid the mess of straps down her shoulders. Whether it was a good idea to expose a weakness like that out loud remained to be seen. He braced his hands wide apart on the edge of the bench and met her eyes again. Only inches remained between them.

"You're allowed to say 'no'." His words were quiet, but distinct. This was important, but he couldn't stop staring at her mouth. And oh, that little scrunch of her features in confusion was going to end him. "I'm paying for your time. I didn't buy *you*. Don't have to do *every* damn thing I ask for. If you don't want."

He'd made a statement out of it, but it hung in the air like a question.

Plenty cheerful and social in the office, Christina couldn't manage words around him out here. He watched her throat move as she swallowed. Decisions were happening behind those eyes and there was no way for him to understand all the factors.

Something brushed his right thumb. A glance flicked down showed him her smallest finger extended into the contact. Her lips had parted. A thigh

shifted at his hip.

William James Marshall about came unglued.

But he didn't. He seized a hold of the disaster inside him and brought his knuckles up to brush, featherlight, down the bare slope of her chest. When they reached the unsupported top of her dress, her bra, she made a little noise. In her throat. Not even enough to count as a whimper, but Bill was rock hard and ready to stop being a gentleman.

He pushed the fabric out of the way. Flipped the thicker bra cups down over their wire and band, both hands at once. She didn't hide. Just leaned there on her arms. Breathing. Watching him.

Two perfect dollops of cream, with fucking cherries on top, but Bill didn't spend more than a second looking because they were already in his hands.

Warm. Soft. Tips pebbling under his touch. He was going to drill his dick right into the side of this bench. This was fantasy shit right here, his hands on Christina this way.

His thumbs grazed nipples and her breath caught. Forefingers came into it and he rolled and tugged on the sensitive tips, eyes on her face for reactions worth more than any glimpse of flesh could ever be.

Her teeth sank into her lower lip, eyelids drifted closed. She was here. Here with him. And she wanted.

Bill wanted.

He stopped calculating and ducked his head. Sucked her into his mouth.

The move drew a full, uncontrolled gasp from her like she'd just come above water for air. His hand came to the base of her neck, pressing her into his hunger, and Bill couldn't avoid groaning against the recognition of just how fucked he was.

*I don't care. I don't care anymore.*

He lapped at her. Suckled. Mauled her other breast in his hand. Switched sides and brought her other nipple between his teeth. He felt one of her elbows give up support, and then her locking it in place again. Her head had fallen back and his jeans were way the fuck too tight.

Bill rose up out of delirium to adjust the strain of his dick up and out of his pant leg. *Fuck!*

He couldn't tell if Christina was flushed or if it was just the pink of sunset coming through the windows. Her lips were full, though, and she looked at him like he was a madman. Which he probably was, but could anyone blame him? There would be no keeping his hands to himself.

Her nipples were wet under his fingers, softened and swollen from the hot work of his mouth. His touch began gentle as he stood between her knees, but there were appetites over which Bill was failing to retain control.

The pressure tightened as he had both pink nubs between first and middle fingers like scissors. Her mouth fell open, a slip of tongue came out to wet her lips, and blood surged into the head of his cock.

Bill switched gears and swiped the damp skin with the pads of his thumbs, thrilling to feel her body tightening the little peaks down to hardness again. His pulse quickened to see a dusting of gooseflesh rise on her breasts and lower arms. She was flying with him, and it should have been enough, but ...

He took her, both sides, between thumb and forefinger again, no longer experimental. The squeeze became a grip. Blue eyes shot up to his. Grip became clamp, and her brows came together. Tighter.

Her spine curved away from his pull and Christina whined, but he didn't let go. Delicate skin pulled under his hold. She made no moves to fend him off, but made some sound between pain and something else that had him about coming in his pants.

"Bill." It was tentative. Someone approaching a dog that might bite. She took a deep breath. "You said you wouldn't hurt me. Not on purpose."

It was the briefest dousing of ice cold water. She was right. They'd agreed.

But Bill had his suspicions. He would stop, if that's what she wanted, but ...

"Is that what you want, Christina?" A measured tug, a throb of pressure. "Want me to stop?"



Several breaths passed through her parted lips, her eyes closed against what he offered. Bill slid the grip of his fingers, just so much, the beginnings of a twist on captive flesh.

She hissed. Pushed her breasts up into his cruelty. Her thighs widened and her fucking pussy rolled against his belt!

*Christ, just fuck her now! Get your fucking dick out of your pants and pound her right here on this bench!*

Bill barely managed to see past the red, but her face was enough.

She was too beautiful this way. He turned harder, testing her limits, watching her teeth show in a lovely grimace. The rise and fall of her chest became more obvious. He began to alternate pressure, closing his grip on one tender nipple while relaxing it on the other. Then the opposite. Back and forth. Again. And again.

Christina had given up composure. He could feel the rhythmic tilt of her hips against his waist. Did she even realize she was doing it?

*So hot. So fucking hot.*

But Bill had goals today, and no customer pulling into the lot was going to interrupt while they were locked up in here.

Even as he bent again to wipe the pain clear with passes of his tongue, locking his inner sadist back in its cage as he went, his right hand was already gathering the fabric of her dress. The kindness of his mouth in contrast had her wavering through a quiet moan, and it wasn't until she felt the dusting of knuckles on her inner thigh that Christina's eyes flew open to see what he did.

Hell, when his own focus shifted to his new priority, Bill's whole train of thought nearly derailed.

*Fffuuuck.*

Some noise happened in his chest. Almost a growl.

*They match. She has red goddamn panties on.*

And they were soaked through.

Christina saw what he saw, and squirmed, legs unable to close with his body spreading her knees. Was it embarrassment, though, or a desire to stop? But he'd told her. Told her she didn't have to, and here she was.

He turned his wrist and cupped the damp well of her crotch, massaging the flat of four fingers into the place where she was wet. For him.

“Oh, god.” Her words rode out with her exhale, a slurred whisper that she was no more in control than he had been. She pushed herself into his hand, forgetting to care whether he saw.

And Bill needed to see more.

He left off teasing to hook his fingers under the top edge of her panties. Tugging brought the flimsy material out over the curve of a hip, down past her mound. The scent of her had him howling inside. Bill wanted her in his mouth, to taste, to consume. There was probably a crude Big Bad Wolf and Little Red joke to be made here, but he ground his teeth and kept away from it. That was not what they were doing today.

“Lift,” he said, when his pull wouldn’t make it past the edge of the bench. Christina obeyed again—*so hot, just kill me*—and tilted onto one hip so he could take her panties down past her ass. Then the other side, without him asking.

They came over her knees, her calves, off around the flat shoes she wore. Bill stuffed the wadded handful into a front pocket, out of the way, and not on any of the shop’s filthy surfaces.

And then, holy fuck, there she was. Perched on the edge, bare pussy on display, red dress draping over the side of the bench like a tablecloth. Whatever she saw on his face had her bringing her thighs back together, but Bill was there, parting them again with his hands and hips.

She shifted, arms close to her body now, as nerves condensed her brow. The straps of her dress and bra still banded her upper arms, and more soft material gathered where thigh met hip. What did that vulnerability feel like? Were the rivets and stitching of his jeans rough against her thighs? Was the air curling between her legs, up and around her nipples, cool or warm? What would he do, now that he had her spread, exposed, out in the shop where Jonah might come knocking if luck didn’t play nice today?

Christina kept her eyes trained on his. The way they scanned back and forth said she tried to read him, and it had his cock thumping away behind his belt, hoping he might see reason. Bill ignored it.

He traced fingers down her throat, across her collarbone. He painted the line of his touch between her breasts, along the underside of their curves. She was perfect and he wanted this so very, very badly.

There was nothing for her to hide behind when he found her with his hand again. Fingertips found slick velvet and she inhaled through her nose, lips rubbing together to stifle her sounds. He traced out a path through all that delicate ruffling of feminine flesh, coming to know her shape, her texture, better than he'd had a chance to on the other side of the office door.

The bead of her clit was there, firm but concealed like a pearl. Bill earned quiet, high-pitched grunts of delicious suffering when he thumbed at the hood, rolled it back and forth at a lazy pace. He dipped fingers along her slit and down into wetness, drawing them up after to keep her slick for more circling, more teasing.

She was breathing through her mouth now, but watching him. Her thighs kept trying to butterfly closed around his touch while his body held them wide. She was everything, and everything Bill wanted today would start with a question. If he could do it right.

*But first ...*

He lifted his hand away and ran a thumb along coated fingertips, right between them where Christina could see.

“Open.”

Her ribs expanded. She knew what he meant. Wet her lips with her tongue.

Obeded.

*Sweet Jeeesus.*

His slid his first two fingers past her lower lip. Pushed them back toward her throat. She closed her mouth around his fingers and sucked.

He hadn't asked.

Bill was about to nut right there when her tongue oozed between his fingers, cleaning and wetting the skin at the same time as she tasted her own arousal. But here was the question.

“You touch yourself, Christina?”

Blue eyes widened, but he didn't let her have her mouth back. She could answer him like this, just because. Because he wanted to see it, to hear it that way.

“Do you?”

She offered a small nod around his fingers. He stroked them over her tongue like they were still between her legs, and couldn't help a smile.

“Is that a yes?”

He felt her try to swallow. “Yugh.” There was a note of pleading in her muffled affirmative, and his cock swelled some more.

Bill took his hand back and her pupils were as wide as he'd ever seen them. He returned to his toying with more aggression, and Christina hissed through her teeth.

“Nnghfuck!”

He flirted at her entrance, just a knuckle or so teasing in and out, petting the lower rim with the lightest touch he could manage. More nectar leaked around his fingers.

“When do you do it?” he said. “At night?” Small movements tinkered between her legs.

“Mmhmm.” Her eyes had scrunched shut, all concentration on what he was doing. She didn't see his other hand rise to the nape of her neck.

Fingers fisted into blonde hair at the scalp, just below where she kept it knotted on the back of her head. Bill hauled back, exposing her throat. Her eyes and mouth flew open.

“Use your words, Christina Lee.” He singled out her clit, pinching it at the base between thumb and forefinger. “Is that when you touch this pussy? After the sun goes down?”

“Yessss.” She humped at his hand, and it was all Bill could do not to throw all his plans out the window and bury himself balls deep right that minute.

*But you're so close.*

“You make yourself come?” He let go the stiff little bead and rolled it under his thumb so the blood could flow again.

“Bill!”

Her head was back under his pull and the sound of her breath rasping was a primitive music. If she wasn't ready now, he'd be out of ideas.

“Do you.”

Tug. Gasp.

“Make yourself.”

Two fingers, second knuckles, twisting.

“Come.”

“Ye-ESS, Bill!” She broke on the admission while he worked her, the sound almost like she was choking past a sob. It was the confession he wanted.

Bill took back his touch. Both hands.

Eyes searched the shop ceiling and, when the nothing continued, she righted her neck to stare at him, lost. He took a step back and her knees stayed open, beautiful pussy swollen and pink, even in what was left of the dimming light.

“Show me,” he said.

“What?”

She knew what. He knew she did. Two more big steps and Bill was leaning against the nearest truck's fender. He hooked his thumbs into his belt. “You heard me.” Gave her a nod. “Show me how you touch yourself.” She just had to decide to do it.

“How I ...” Her spine slumped, eyes drifting off as though she was translating his words from a second language.

“Touch yourself.” He finished for her, watching her face change as she ran scenarios in her head. With him a few feet away, if she really wanted to, she could cover up and hightail it right out of there. Bill crossed his boots over at the ankle, his arms over his chest, waiting.

“Bill ...” She gave a tiny shake of her head. “Why?”

Now it was his turn to swell with need. He had to unset his jaw to speak. “You done it in front of someone else before?”

Another head shake. Some of her hair had fallen loose and brushed her cheekbone. “No.”

The temperature in the shop had to have gone up ten degrees. Why not honesty? “Then that’s why,” he said. “I want you to show me something you’ve never shown anyone else.”

Her features slackened in disbelief. Bill was glad there was no clock to watch while she hovered in indecision. Everything was still for long, slow heartbeats. He couldn’t even tell if she was breathing, and her eyes went unfocused in the middle distance.

Until they didn’t, and locked back on his.

Her right hand crested her thigh.

*Sweet, merciful Christ.*



Christina had not worn that dress to fuck with him. Quite the opposite. It was the only long dress she had. Cover all that leg she’d been showing in the shorter skirts? Good idea. Plus a sweater for her arms? Bonus.

Except it hadn’t been. And now here she was.

*It wouldn’t have mattered. Look at him, Dodd, you’d’ve been out here no matter what.*

She couldn’t *not* look at him. That was half the problem.

He waited for her over there, the right side of his face lit up with the fire of sunset. Bill Marshall might as well have been the Devil. He leaned, arms crossed, brown eyes burning into her with the challenge.

To show him something she’d never shared with anyone. To finish what he’d started.

Her skin prickled, even in the warm air, the exposure of her body the least of her worries at the moment.

Fear had been there, but not *this* fear. When she’d followed him into the shop, her most secret worry was one Bill had veered away from at the last second like the edge of a cliff. Not only that he would make her come—a

terrifying possibility after their last encounter—but that she wanted it from him. To an obsessive degree.

No, this was worse. As Christina sat there doing her best to block out her environment and the one other person in it, she knew this was much worse. It was alarming in the way the blow-job had been alarming. He kept robbing her of the passive role.

Did her nipples ache for more attention? Yes. Was her pussy throbbing? Way too much. Did she want to finish? Of fucking *course* she did!

But was Bill going to take her there? No. Was he going to demand she hold still while he tore whatever result he wanted from her body? Nope.

He'd brought her to the edge and left her there. Again. Christina had never been so hot in all her life, and this ... fucking ... *asshole*! He had no business turning her on in the first place, and now he was in her head, day and night. The smell of him, the sound of that voice!

And yes, she *had* masturbated. Obviously. Thank god he hadn't asked whether she'd thought of him while doing it. At least over the last couple weeks ...

So now if she wanted to come, she'd have to choose it. On purpose. There would be no just sitting back and letting him take it, letting him relieve the pressure, relieve her of responsibility. He'd said he hadn't bought her, but right now, Christina was feeling owned.

*He owns something right now, that's for sure. Got your head aaall messed up. Haven't even bothered to put your tits away.*

But if he owned her, even just for today, maybe she ought to give him what he asked for. This wasn't even a functional reality, anyway. How could it be when she was sitting around in the shop, considering in a serious manner whether she ought to beat off in front of Asshole Bill?

*You should do it. He won't last two minutes.*

The idea made all her other thoughts shut up and look over, ears perked.

Not bad. Not bad at all. If Christina started to play with herself, Bill had no chance of keeping his shit together. Not after how he'd been acting. He'd be over there in a flash, belt coming open, fly down, and they'd both get

what they wanted. She just wouldn't have to examine what that was, because she'd be busy hanging on for dear life.

She let her right hand creep up over her thigh.

*Deep breath. You got this.*

And slid all four fingers down between her legs. Back up again, slow, dragging her lips taut and carving through the furrow. She could see Bill's jaw go slack on the exhale. This wouldn't take long, at all.

Christina leaned back on her supporting arm and, in a fit of inspiration, hauled her ass backward into the available bench space. Her dangling left leg hooked the backless stool to where it had been and she cocked up a knee to rest her foot there. The pained look on his face was her immediate gratification; the lewd display could only help.

Her clit was under her fingers. On some level of awareness, there were sensations Christina knew as good, but nerves and disbelief kept the bulk of those drowned right out. The motions came by rote: massage in circles, spread wetness, press, roll, pinch, repeat.

Aside from the rise and fall of his chest she could see from those few feet away, Bill stood stoic, arms still crossed, unresponsive to her efforts.

Well. Not entirely unresponsive. There was no mistaking the length ridging the front of his jeans.

She was more familiar with that length now than she'd care to admit.

*Every hole, Christina Lee.*

A small noise whined up from her throat and her eyes fluttered shut. The hiss from her boss brought them flying open again, only to find him pushing his palms down his thighs, the efforts at self-restraint clear.

*Good.* She brought her toying hand up and across her body to cup and squeeze the opposite breast. When she thumbed the nipple, was he even aware of the way he mimicked the movement at his side? The way his Adam's apple moved when she pinched the pink little tip? By the time she brought the active hand to her mouth to take in her own two fingers the same way she'd swallowed his, Bill had uncrossed his ankles and was headed her way.

*Here we go.*



Except he wasn't. A change in stance was all he'd been after, and a passing hand adjusted his bulge. Christina's eyes narrowed. Wet fingers slid back between her thighs. Her hips tilted as she sank one home. Paired it with its twin to churn the two in and out at at what she hoped was a seductive pace.

Bill stared and a flush of heat spread over her chest. Arousal or irritation? Christina couldn't tell. She took the effort back to her clit, genuine sounds of pleasure the next weapon in her arsenal as her fingers moved to entice. They moved. They moved and *moved* and moved.

And Bill did not.

*The fuck?*

There had to be something she wasn't getting. Christina had zero talent for dirty talk, but did her best to drop her voice down to somewhere that might sound smoky. She watched the lazy plunge of her fingers while she spoke.

"Is this what you want, Bill?"

"Yeah, it is." His words came hoarse and Christina couldn't help a smirk. She had him.

"For how much longer?"

He'd be inside her in thirty seconds.

"Until you're finished."

Her eyes snapped up to his. Movements stopped in mid-stroke. She blinked at him.

Bill gave her a slow nod. "Finish." The enunciation made it a command. "Show me."

Christina pulsed around her own knuckles. Her heart jerked in her chest. Way in over her head: that's where she was now. When he talked to her like that, she ... she wanted to grovel. Wanted to crawl and abase herself, wanted to lay her cheek to the side over folded arms on the ground and push her ass up in the air for whatever he wanted.

It was way too much, and her wrist moved again, almost of its own will. Fingertips sought those sensitive places for a different reason. Not for a show. Not for bait.

For Bill. Because he wanted it.

She let out a shuddering sigh as the weight of it all settled on her shoulders.

*Fine. This is where you're at right now. Own it.*

Her ring finger slid to join the other two, the wet mess between her legs slipping and stretching to fit. Bill's hand had moved to cup his erection, and Christina knew what would fill her better than any fingers.

Her teeth caught her lower lip as she fucked in and out. Eyes closed, pussy swallowing down three-fifths of her own hand, the mounts of her palm grinding at her clit in tandem. Her boss made some tortured noise, but she couldn't look. The best view was on the backs of her eyelids where her mind kept the idea on loop: he had her pushed back on the workbench, one leg over his forearm, held open for the cock he fed up into her cunt. He took it slow, for as long as he wanted, no matter how close she came, or whined, or begged.

The scuff of a bootstep made Christina twitch, but it was too late now. Everything was swollen, throbbing, tumbling toward release.

Warmth brushed her dangling thigh and her mouth fell open, all defenses gone against whatever was coming next. She opened her eyes and Bill loomed, his gaze electric. That grip was in her hair again, holding her where he chose with a fist.

It was all unstoppable now. Need took over and the fingers stuffing her hole rose to ravage her clit. Speed and slick friction, an eye-crossing contrast, catalyzed to break her world. She choked on nothing, unable to look away, and Bill was the last, volatile element.

"Christina." Knuckles ground at the base of her skull. "Come for me."

Her jaw snapped shut. A high-pitched noise rose to a squeal in the back of her throat.

One.

*Here we go.*

Two.

*Oh god, oh fuck.*

*THREE*, and Bill was inches from her face, somehow sucking it all out of her with dark eyes alone. Her pussy gaped in orgasm, milking at nothing while her clit screamed its release. Fingers twitched, jerking everything along, rolling whimpers pathetic even as her eyes opened wider to let in all the consequences.

The rushing of blood subsided in her ears, and now there was silence in the shop. Silence and breathing. Hers. His. Neither steady. If Christina hadn't known better, she'd say Bill was as dumbstruck as she was.

He let go her hair, trailing his touch down her neck as he went. She held down a shiver and wanted to smack herself for it. Her foot slid off the stool and the hem of her dress dropped over a knee. A tumble of wrists and elbows had her bra and top back in place. More or less.

Her boss wasn't smiling, but something hard had abandoned the set of his jaw. He took a step back, making room for her to ease down off the bench and onto her feet. Red fabric fell the rest of the way to her ankles. Between her legs, a warm buzz, and her ears, the white noise of confusion.

Bill was no place to look for answers. His face might have had questions written on it, himself, if she could even see that well in the last of the light. He stepped close. Reached down and took her hand.

Wadded a pair of panties into it.

She was too stupid just then to react, so he closed her fingers around the cloth. Let go her curled fist a few long seconds later.

"Your shift's been over for at least half an hour, Dodd." His words were quiet, the slightest affect in delivery, as though he spoke in a code. "Oughta go home. Enjoy your day off tomorrow."

It would have taken her too long to know what to say, anyway. By the time she'd swallowed to wet her throat again, he'd already brushed her arm with his on the way back out of the shop. Unless she wanted to stand here in the dark, there was nothing else she could do.

Christina pulled on her underwear, closed the shop door behind her, and rode on one newly-inflated tire all the way back to her trailer, all on the wings of a single, obliterating thought.

*What the fuck. Did I just do.*



Christina's Bronco wasn't done crunching out of the lot before Bill ground his teeth and spurt cum over his knuckles and into the bathroom sink. His other hand braced his weight against the wall, and the last of his breath hissed under tight control from a clenched jaw.

It was about the only thing he had under control, at that point.

Bill let his heartbeat simmer and took advantage of paper towels and running water to clean up, to tuck everything back in his pants. As far as Jonah knew from the front counter, his boss was just back there taking a piss and washing his hands.

It had taken every ounce of his discipline out in the shop. The fact that he'd confined himself to a friendly hand on the outside of his jeans was a minor miracle. Forget what he'd asked her to do. As soon as she'd started to follow through, he was done. Everything inside him screaming, *Just take it! You see her face! She wants what you want!*

But, oh, the self-restraint had been worth it.

Something shuddered in his chest as Bill splashed a final round of water on his face and dragged the wet hand through his hair. The sounds she'd made. *Come for me.* Ri-goddamn-diculous, to say something like that, but the widening of her eyes, the savagery of her hand ...

Hell, even those times she'd said his name when *he* was touching her. Bill didn't even particularly like his name, but when it came from *her* mouth, an exclamation of want, it was almost more than he could handle.

Christina Lee Dodd was a fucking drug, and they did not make rehab for addictions like this.

*What the fuck have you started, Marshall? How do you think this is gonna end?*

He'd want more and more, that was for sure. And what else could he have, without some serious disruption to his business? Jonah and Travis couldn't find out. He could just hear it now: *'Christina only got that holiday off because she's banging Bill.'*

He frowned as he closed the door to the bathroom behind him and stood, restless, in the back half.

‘Banging.’ The term would be hot, he guessed, if he was talking about some random piece of ass. Let someone else call what he and Christina were doing ‘banging’, though? He’d knock their fuckin’ teeth in.

*This here is a level of trouble you ain’t prepared to deal with.*

None of these were good signs. What was going to happen when somebody else came into the picture?

Bill was only partway aware of his fingers curling into fists as he traveled this line of thought. Their little pay-for-play arrangement was one thing, but what *would* happen when some guy came along throwing his hat in the ring as an actual boyfriend? She wasn’t going to keep her boss on as some sort of side dick. Not if someone volunteered to treat her like a human being.

And he didn’t want to be that guy. Clamoring for attention from the sidelines.

*Then what guy do you want to be?*

No. There was no answering that question. Not without the complete destruction of his fantasy world. You know, the one he shouldn’t have been building in the first place.

The fog of Bill’s gaze came into focus on one of the chairs tucked under the folding table where his employees ate lunch. His brain, the drunken architect who’d gotten them into this mess, was already erecting new rooms at haphazard angles, blithely refusing to look back at the structures crumbling in its wake.

There were no shitty futures, only impossible glinting moments. The things he wanted grew smaller and smaller by turns, their pressure and delicacy straining toward limits. Bill was going to grasp at them anyway, he already knew. Even when his clumsy grip would do no better than crush.

There wasn’t going to be a lick of common sense when it came to Christina Lee. He could see every sign along the way, none of them good, while he raced past, cackling, accelerator jammed to the floor and brakes shot somewhere back where the pavement ended.

The question was, would she go with him?



Eggs.

Eggs everywhere. The roll-up doors of box trucks. The front window of the office.

And toilet paper. All along the fence line. Strewn out onto the gravel like damp party noisemakers, fully unfurled.

Christina stood with her fists on her hips, several feet away from a similarly arrayed Bill, assessing the damage. Well. Not damage, so much as the level of pain-in-the-assery this was all going to be to clean up.

A yellow mutt snuffled along the shady west side of the office, and her boss shook his head. "Figures. Day I decide to bring the dog to work again, and we got *this*."

Bill's phone rang and he hauled it out of a pants pocket.

"Yeah."

Christina squinted in his direction, into the morning light, then moved off toward the trucks, her focus on something odd near the base of a tire. She could hear Bill grumbling some reply to whoever was on the line before he hung up.

"That was Dawn from the gas station," he said, taking a few steps closer to make himself heard. "Said they got it there, too. Couple more places right here along the highway. Fuckin' buncha teenagers out after Prom, what she thinks."

She bent down and cocked her head at the mottled circle on the ground. "Is this a *tortilla*?"

Bill snorted from a couple paces behind her. "'S what it looks like." The tinkle of dog tags came toward them.

"Weird." She stood, shaking her head.

“Well,” he said, surveying the lot, “it’s just us, and we gotta get this shit cleaned up. Eggs’ll ruin the paint on the trucks if we leave ‘em.” He sighed. It wasn’t what anyone planned to do when they showed up at work, of a morning. Daisy came to lean against his leg, tail flapping in every direction. An absentminded hand dropped to scratch the furry head. “Guess we can just leave the front door open. Phone rings, one of us’ll hear it.”

Christina made a grim face and looked down at her bare knees. A grinning dog face materialized, wanting pets from her, too. She worried a tawny ear between fingers.

“How far’s your house from here?” he asked.

“What?”

“I mean, uh ...” Bill scratched the back of his neck. “You want to go home and put on some pants? Probably not the best for me to have us out here gettin’ filthy while you got a skirt on.”

*Never stopped him before.*

Christina had to slap herself into gear after such a reasonable offer out of nowhere. “I ... think I might have something in the truck.” She eyed the Bronco. “Let me go see.”

The dog moved off to sniff around truck tires, tanked up on human approval for at least the next ten minutes.

Sure enough, a pair of gray track pants waited inside a grocery bag she’d thrown in the back of the Bronco a few weeks ago. She’d taken them as a change of clothes after working on her granddad’s place, but never bothered to use them once the time came. They’d work.

“I got something,” she called, hoisting the bag as she backed out of the truck. “I’ll go change.”

“All right,” Bill said to her back as she headed into the office.

That weird feeling of excitement rode with her on her way to the tiny bathroom. The one where something different was happening at work and, even though it might be an inconvenience, there was still something fun about it. Like figuring out how to take credit card payments when a lightning storm took out the power for a while. Or that sort of battle-prep panic when you realize everyone other than you has called out sick. They



were going to do something *different* today, and who knew what could happen?

The door closed behind her, and Christina shook the track pants loose out of the bag. Laid them across the sink and started wiggling out of her skirt.

More, everything took on new meaning since this whole situation with Bill. Before, changing clothes in the back would have been nothing to even think about. Now? There was the thought that he *knew* she was back here. Knew she was tugging her skirt down past her hips.

*He would've known that before!*

Yes, but now there was a spotlight pointed at it, wasn't there? Asshole Bill knew things now, about what sort of business went on beneath her clothes. Knew what she looked like, what she felt like.

*Christ, you're a train wreck.*

Christina yanked on the pants and cinched the drawstring tight. The skirt traded places, stuffed inside the plastic bag, and she barged her way back out of the office in a huff.

It was time to get to work and stop worrying about Bill Fucking Marshall.

When she came back outside, he was pulling one of the eggy box trucks onto the driveway in front of the shop. After throwing her unneeded skirt on the front seat of the Bronco, Christina hiked over to meet Bill as he was getting out of the cab. Daisy trotted around the lot on perpetual fly-by, attending to the important canine business of the day, whatever that was.

"Hose won't reach out to the fence line," said Bill, "so I'm gonna pull the trucks they hit up this way. If you could spray 'em down, and then we'll see if any little pieces are left dried on there."

"And if they are?" Christina headed toward the hose on the side of the shop.

"Brake fluid. It'll take it right off."

"For real?"

He grunted some reply, heading back to the front of the lot for another truck. She shrugged and started uncoiling hose, making a face at the amount of spider webs that came snapping apart as she did.

Just as Bill parked the second truck, the phone inside started up.

“I’ll get it.” He waved her off, climbing out of the cab. “Just do what you’re doing.”

Christina shrugged and started blasting away yolks. If he wanted to play office bitch in her stead, let him.

The morning ticked away, sun rising over the office until she went from warm to hot. The novelty of outdoor work was not altogether unpleasant, not compared to navigating stacks of newspapers and what-all-else at her granddad’s.

Then it was brake fluid time.

“Here.” Bill covered the open mouth of the yellow bottle with a red shop rag and upended the whole mess. Then righted it and handed her the rag. “Once you get what’s left of the egg off, though, you gotta wash off the brake fluid with soap. It’ll eat the paint just as bad as the egg, you leave it sit on there.”

“Fire with fire, eh?”

He made some noise that was almost a laugh. “Yeah. I’ll go get some soap in a bucket for you.”

So now Christina was massaging brake fluid into the side of a cargo box, an orange bucket of sudsy water at her feet, while Bill did something that involved a lot of clanking in the back of the shop.

She didn’t know *what* he was doing because she refused to look. Nope. No way. Not back in there where the workbench was. Not where that sneaky snake had teased her out of her panties and talked her into some exhibitionist shit she’d never imagined in a thousand years.

*Finish. Show me.*

Christina muttered a curse at the circling rag as her boss moved past with a ladder balanced on his shoulder.

“You all right?” he asked on his way by.

“Yeah.” She bent to switch the brake fluid rag for the soapy one.

*Like hell, you are.*

His words had been rattling around in her head, violating the safety of her two days off without him even having to be there. Whose fault was it when her pulse leapt earlier? When he'd pointed out they'd be the only two working today?

There would be sense to make if it were *all clearly* a power trip. But it wasn't. She could see the cracks in his control, those hairlines of light on a volcanic crust, fracturing here and there, but grinding closed just as quick. There was something at stake here for Bill, too. What *that* was, though? Who the fuck knew.

Aluminum clunked at the side of the cargo box on the truck behind her. Christina turned her head to see Bill settling the ladder into place.

"What are you doing?"

"Seeing if any of the eggs got on the roo—are you *kidding* me?"

Now she put down the rag and turned all the way around, squinting up in Bill's direction. "What's going on?"

"There's tortillas all *over* the fuckin' top of this thing!"

"What?" She couldn't hold down a laugh.

"There's gotta be ... ten, twelve of 'em up here?"

Christina outright cackled now. "You gotta give 'em credit, though," she said, wiping her eyes, "that's pretty creative."

Bill mumbled something about 'goddamn kids' while he climbed back down the ladder. Mischief, maybe contagious on the air from the vandals of last night, had her running her mouth.

"What's wrong, Bill, you never did nothin' totally irresponsible before?"

He stopped, mid-step and blinked at her, and the look on his face was worth the full hundred percent of whatever price she'd have to pay. Then the corner of his mouth twitched in what Christina was coming to learn was as close as he got to a grin. With a shake of his head, he headed back into the shop.

She shouldn't have been smiling after him.

He came out with a push broom, Daisy loping in wide circles as he returned to the ladder.

“Add *this* to the list of shit they don’t tell you about when you buy a rental yard.”

Christina lifted the bucket and set it back down a few steps further along the truck. Her brows pinched together when she went back to scrubbing. She’d only been working there the last two years. Before that ...

“Bill, what’d you used do before you bought the Haul Ash?”

Nothing from her boss. He was dragging the business end of the broom toward him across the top of the box, pulling tortillas off to drop on the concrete. Maybe he hadn’t heard.

*Maybe you pissed him off! You think Asshole Bill wants to answer a bunch of questions?*

She attacked egg remnants with more vigor.

“I was a cop.”

Her hand fell at her side. *Really? Bill, a co—yeah.* It made complete sense. All of it. The no-nonsense attitude. The way he just expected everyone to do as he said, without question.

*Jesus Christ, no wonder he had you bend over that table and spread your ankles that first time.*

“Why, uh ...” She was pushing her luck. “How come you’re not still?”

“You really wanna know all that shit?” he said to the top of the truck. Muscles in his back made the shape of his shirt change as he reached with the broom.

“I asked, didn’t I?”

Another tortilla hit the cement. Bill made his way down the ladder and slid it a few feet further along the side of the truck. Started back up the rungs.

“I ain’t a cop no more because I got sick of being a party to a bunch of immoral bullshit.” Christina’s eyebrows nearly launched into space. “And yeah, I get it,” he said. “Irony.” As though he’d seen her look rather than the company logo on the side of the truck as he climbed.

“But I’m gonna dig my own goddamn grave. Ain’t gonna let someone else dig it for me. I could tell you stories, make you wanna burn this whole place to the ground.”

They were having this conversation almost at a holler, what with distance and facing opposite directions, but Christina felt as though she'd pulled some lynchpin. Her normally reticent boss was rolling now, and she could only stand there and blink at the relative flood of candor.

"And you know what else I got out of the deal?" She didn't. "A brand new ex-wife."

She wasn't even pretending to clean up egg now. "You got a divorce?" Bill had an *ex-wife*? Who the fuck would ...

Daisy trotted between the trucks just as another tortilla fluttered down—*fwap*. The black glossy nose made a beeline.

"Yeah. Right after she left my ass." An elbow hauled back on broom handle. "It was like she never stopped being a teenager," he went on. "Wanted to party all the fuckin' time. When I left that job, though, the party was fuckin' over."

The yellow mutt was happily wolfing down tasty flour circles.

"How was you being a cop a party for her?"

"Well," he said, starting another trip back down, "if you're the wife of an officer, a lot of stupid behavior gets overlooked. Normal person might get a DUI. Her?" He shook his head as he reached the ground. "No. Plus, it ain't nothin' to brag about when your husband runs a tr—*goddammit* dog! You're gonna get sick!"

His tail-wagging best friend looked up at him, licking her lips. Christina laughed without even hiding it.

"Did she eat a bunch of those?" Bill asked, leaning the broom against the truck.

"I think only one or two." She leaned down to start helping Bill collect the scattered tortillas. "I don't think they'll hurt her any."

"My luck she'll get the shits at two AM."

Christina snickered. Not over the gross image of dog indigestion, but of Asshole Bill derailed from a perfectly good rant by his own goofball mutt.

He added her handful of edible vandalism to his own and walked the bunch over to the trash on the side of the shop. "You about done with the egg over there?"

Back to business, then. She sighed. “Yeah, just this one last place here.” Went in for a final round with the brake fluid.

Bill came back for the ladder and moved it to the truck she was cleaning. Daisy hovered around near the tire, eyes on the broom, probably on the lookout for more manna from heaven.

“What about you?” He was climbing again.

“Mm?”

“Before,” he said. “You didn’t just ... materialize outta thin air and start workin’ for me two years ago.”

The phone rang in the office. “Hang on,” she said.

*I can’t believe he bothered to ask.*

She ducked in the front door and around the counter. “Thank you for calling Haul Ash Truck and Trailer, how may I help you?”

...

“We *are* open on Sunday, yes.”

...

“You’re welcome. Have a good day.”

Christina put her hands on the counter, eyes going unfocused as she stared out the front windows. What was she going to tell him? Had to be something. He’d told her about leaving his job *and* his ex-wife.

*Bare bones. That’ll be enough.*

She put on a neutral face when she rounded the back of the truck again. Picked up the soapy rag for the last of it.

“You’re right,” she said. “I didn’t materialize. Had about a semester and a half left on my degree. Had to drop out and take care of my granddad.”

There didn’t seem to be nearly as many tortillas on top of this truck. “Why?” he asked, looking down through his armpit at her. “Why’d you ‘have to’?”

It had been enough time. She could say it and be calm. “Dad passed away. There was no one else to do it. I got a couple cousins, but ... they got their own problems.”

There. She stepped back to eye the side of the truck. It was egg-free, as far as Christina could tell.

“I know about relatives comin’ up scarce when someone needs help. Sure do.” A boot pressed onto a rung beside her head. Then another, lower. Bill leaned the broom again. “What was your degree supposed to be in?”

She snorted. “Oh, no. ‘Cause I don’t want to hear any shit about it.”

“Come on.” He put his weight on a hand on the side of the truck, and wiped his brow with the back of his other arm. “I’m not gonna say anything.”

Why? Was it the show of being hot and tired? His worry about the dog? Something softened beneath her ribs. She let out a breath.

“Sociology.” To his credit, not one muscle in his face twitched. “I was focusing on gerontology. Old folks.”

Bill nodded. “Someone’s gotta worry about old people. Might as well be you.” The corners of his eyes crinkled with some kind of warmth she didn’t understand, just before he tilted the ladder onto a shoulder again and headed back into the shop.

Christina looked down at the bucket. Let the rag fall into it with a splat.

What were they doing here? Pretending like everything wasn’t colossally weird? Like they were just two coworkers who hadn’t sucked, fucked, and fondled all over this goddamn lot?

But his comment about irony told her he knew. This wasn’t two different universes for him, either. Their whole arrangement was fucked up and wrong, but Bill didn’t have to start getting nosy about her past. She’d never once seen him make small talk just to be polite.

If she subtracted the money, and added in a few other factors ...

Could his interest extend beyond convenience? Was she more to him than just a person to fuck with? Both physically *and* mentally? Because that was what was going on at this point.

He was headed toward her again, aimed at retrieving the broom.

Did she *want* him to be interested in her?

His work shirt shifted over his chest as he walked. The normal sourness had melted away from his face. She fought down a flutter in her gut.

Was ... was *she interested* in Asshole Bill Marshall?

No. That wasn't a thing. Not a thing that existed in nature.

*Christina. Come for me.*

Unmistakable: that hum between her thighs. He grabbed up the broom, setting her nerves to jangle from a couple feet away.

*Okay, time for an emotional sobriety check, Dodd. What would you do? If he came over here right now. Stopped what he was doing, pushed you up against the side of this truck, and broke the very first rule you agreed on? If he tried to kiss you, what would you do?*

Christina did not like her gut reaction to the pop quiz question. Not even one little bit.

"Think we oughta tackle that fence line before lunch," he said.

She turned her head to look where he nodded. There was still toilet paper everywhere.



Christina was playing tug-o-war with the dog, a shop rag—not the brake fluid one—stretched between fist and canine jaws in the driveway of the shop. She fake-growled at the mutt, and Daisy snorted back. From the concrete running along the back of the office where he stood, one side of Bill's mouth curled down in assessment. Mostly of himself.

*You're an idiot, Marshall. And you're doin' this wrong.*

Yeah, all wrong. He'd been paying her for sex. Well, access, anyway. Not acting skills. She didn't need to be nice to him. Or pretend to be. Nobody ever said anything about that.

So why was she?

And was this what he'd been wanting for months and months? Just to fuck her? Was it?

She managed to get the rag away from Daisy and ended the game with some well-placed dog butt scratching. Even got a hind leg kicking. Bill



smiled from where she couldn't see, and watched her head back to the front door of the office.

He eyeballed his watch under the sun, cupping a palm around it so he could see the numbers. Nearly lunch time.

And they were the only two there today.

*So what do you want, then, Bill?*

His eyes closed as he pictured it. Yup. Perfectly stupid, but maybe ...

Actions spoke louder, and he was shit with words, anyhow. Maybe it was the right way.

Bill turned and opened the door to the back half.



Something about being able to move freely around the front office in pants had at least one layer of tension melting away for Christina. She bent down to grab a stack of printer paper and didn't have to worry who she was showing her ass to while she did it.

He hadn't asked her to change after they'd finished cleaning the lot. Just went on about his day, passing through the front only a couple times, the last of which to say he was going on lunch.

She could have put the skirt back on, she supposed. Who could tell if he was going to spring some more stickler-for-the-rules bullshit at any moment? Christina frowned. Hell, maybe she ought to: avoid herself another 'incident'.

*You didn't hate it so much last time, Dodd.*

Well, at least not until the end there. She sighed and shoved the loaded paper tray back into the printer. Bill spent most of his time being a prick. A couple bouts of spontaneous humanity weren't enough to justify the way she c—

"Christina." His voice carried through from the back half.

*Speak of the fucking Devil.*

“Yeah,” she yelled into the empty office. Blinked at the front door, waiting.

Whatever he said next came as a low tumble of sound, either not meant for her or not enough projection to pass through the wall intact. Christina grumbled a light profanity and left the counter to swing open the door.

“You talkin’ to me, Bill?” Her hand was on the knob, weight on the ball of her leading foot. As though leaning in rather than committing bodily to the other room would forestall his wracking of her nerves.

“Yeah,” he said. “Come in here.”

It didn’t.

Bill sat in one of the folding chairs at the lunch table, his back to Christina. The last nub end of some kind of sandwich rested in the shell of an open wrapper next to a bottle of water in front of him. A paperback lay face-down, cracked wide on the tabletop. The blinds were open on the back window, and the space was bright with mid-day light.

Daisy was passed out on the floor, blocking the door that led outside. The dog’s upper jowl flapped in her sleep and for some reason this made Christina exhale, too. She stepped into the room. Came into Bill’s periphery.

“D’you need somethin’?” She was all raised eyebrows and teetering hesitation.

He cocked his head at her. “Why’on’t you come sit down.”

It wasn’t a question.

*Am I in trouble?*

She took a step toward the other chair, the one she usually sat at on the adjacent side of the table, but Bill’s work boot came up to shove it out of the way. The rubber feet brayed over the floor. Her head swiveled on him like an owl’s.

“Over here.” A nod to his leg.

*Fuck.*

His lap? His *lap*?

*Well, there goes the rest of the afternoon.*

Her brows came down. “Bill, no one’s at the counter. Customers might come in.”

“We’ll hear ‘em if they do,” he said. “Come on.” He sounded like he was explaining to someone that there were no monsters underneath the bed. All quiet patience.

On one hand, Bill had asked her for a lot worse. On the other hand, who’s to say he wouldn’t be doing just that five minutes from now?

“I don’t ...” She worried at the fingers of her right hand with the grip of her left. Sighed through her nose. “I don’t understand.”

Bill only stared at her. Shoulders relaxed, palms on his thighs. “It’s not that complicated,” he said after a time. His voice was some blunt, steel tool, placed with a careful hand into a velvet-lined drawer. He was ... trying?

Christina swallowed. At least he wasn’t trying to kiss her.

She stepped around his knee and sat on his left leg. Back straight and laced fingers wedged between her thighs. He gave an airy snort of amusement and shook his head.

When he leaned forward, pressing her arm into his chest, she almost fell off. His right hand reached past to the table and scooped up the paperback. Her boss settled back into place, his focus between pages.

*He’s ... gonna read?*

Christina’s eyes ticked around the back half. There was the bathroom door, slightly ajar. Daisy on the floor. A stack of unfolded boxes on the table by the window. Her ass in Bill’s lap. His nose in a book.

*Um ...*

“Jesus Christ, relax,” he said, without looking up. “Lean back.”

Lean? It ... it was too confusing.

She did it anyway. Slow, like a trap was about to spring, but Christina did. She let herself settle into his shoulder, and the new angle of her spine made her hips twist, her legs draping over his where she’d been prim and perpendicular a minute ago. Bill’s free hand slid around her waist and hung on her hip like a hat taken off at home.

The silence was going to make her wiggle right off onto the floor. He was just ... reading. Christina was lost. She punctured the surface tension.

“What book is this?”

He flipped the front cover closed with a thumb. It was a copy of *Dune*. And judging by the cover art, not printed at any time during this decade. Or the last.

“Nice,” she said, as he went back to his place, about a third of the way through the book. “I’ve read it, but it’s been a while.” A while like ‘high school’ a while.

“I pick it up again every few years,” he said to the pages. “I don’t know if it’s because I really like it that much, or my brain is just getting high off the familiarity.”

Hearing him talk like this, in this quiet way, no urgency, no formality, was thawing something in her bones. She softened further into his shoulder. “You ever see that documentary? About this dude who was supposed to make the *Dune* movie? Before the David Lynch one got off the ground?”

He shifted the leg she wasn’t sitting on and adjusted his grip on the book. “I’m not really into documentaries.”

“But you’ve seen the movie?”

“Yeah.” He brought his right arm around her and, for a moment, she was in a circle of warmth that fucked with her reality on several levels. But he was only bringing the pages to his opposite hand so he could flip to the next one. The circle broke and she corralled her thoughts.

“Then you’ll like this. It was crazy. They did all this work. They’d gotten all these major celebrities to agree to be in it. It would have been nuts. I’ll bring it in for you.”

Bill’s attention shifted, brown eyes meeting hers. The corner of his mouth turned up and Christina about wanted to die. “All right,” he said. “If you want.” His focus moved back to spice and spacecrafts. “Now shut up, or I’m gonna make you read this to me.”

The words were playful, though, and Christina smiled. She allowed herself to sit in it. Got warm and gave herself the okay to melt a little.

She wasn’t going to stare at the side of his head, so she read along, even though they were in the middle of the book. Waited for him to turn another

page when she finished before he did. Bill's hand ventured down her thigh, gave an absent squeeze, and then returned to her hip to be still.

The normalcy was almost violent in its opposition to everything else.

Christina glanced up at the table under the back window. The feel of it pressing against her cheekbone, bruising her pelvis just a few weeks ago, still vivid and hypnotic in the theater of her mind.

*You want the rest of today off, too?*

That feeling was back. Cinnamon heat between her thighs that shouldn't exist in response to an opening act like that. And now here she was. Sitting on his lap. Calm. Reading. Possibly ready to let her eyes close and take a nap.

This was the most bass-ackwards courtship she'd ever heard of in her life.

*And ... and I don't hate it.*

She was still adrift in impossibility when Bill twisted in the chair to see the clock. The muscles in her backside flexed to keep her from slipping to the ground.

"Lunch time's over for me," he said, leaning for the table again.

Christina was still blinking out of her stupor while her boss picked up what looked like a receipt and stuffed it between the pages for a bookmark.

*At least he didn't dogear the corner like a savage.*

Then his nose brushed under her ear. She was wide awake now.

"Thank you." Lips painted the words over the pulse in her neck, but he was already getting his feet under him to stand.

Christina slid from his lap and the chair made a rubbery noise over the floor as he pushed it back and came to his feet. The hand that had been at her waist found the back of her neck, and Bill faced her, making way more eye contact than she could handle. His thumb grazed the base of her skull. Her lips parted.

"You should get something to eat," he said. Fingers gave a light squeeze. Bill stepped away and gathered the wrapper from his sandwich, the half-finished water bottle. He tossed his trash and stowed the book somewhere

she didn't see, because it was happening behind her and Christina couldn't move.

"Eat," he said again, off to her right. The door to the front bumped shut behind him.

Christina's fingers drifted to her mouth as though something had happened there. Food. Food was supposed to be happening there, but that wasn't what she wanted.

She turned her head to stare at the door.

Bill Marshall needed to come back in here and finish what the fuck he'd started.

There was a dry shuffle on the floor and her attention moved to Daisy. The dog stretched, front legs and back, and then gave her The Look while standing near the door, tail wagging.

She turned the knob and the mutt trotted out and began to snuffle around for a place to squat.

*At least the fucking dog'll tell me what she wants.*

And there was still half of her shift left to go.



Bill Marshall had no one to blame but himself for the state he was in now.

He leaned on the palm of his left hand on the edge of his kitchen sink, staring out the window above it at a sunrise getting ready to happen, eyes unfocused. A full coffee mug was in his other hand and he sipped, then swore.

Way too hot, still.

The owner of the Haul Ash was going to need the patience of a saint to get what he wanted. After that lunch break with her settled onto his lap like there was no place else she belonged ... God *damn*.

He shifted his weight onto the other foot and let his morning caffeine hover while the sky awakened from pink to yellow above the treeline.

Canine toenails clicked on the linoleum. Bill looked down and received a wag-tail good morning, Daisy's bright eyes friendly but petitioning.

"All right." He set the mug on the counter. "Come on, dog."

The tawny mutt wriggled through the side door off the laundry room as soon as he had it cracked wide enough and had an industrious nose to the grass in less time than that. He stood there for a minute in his boxers, watching her snuffle, before ducking back inside to scoop some kibble and refill her outdoor dish. Her water he topped off from the spigot just outside the door.

Dog prepped for her day in the yard, Bill went back to his coffee, which was ready not to blister his tongue.

This time, he leaned his tailbone against the kitchen island as he sipped. Surveyed his living room and shook his head.

This was why he didn't bring women home. Most everything in his house looked forty years out of date. There was wood paneling everywhere. And not the trendy reclaimed hipster kind. The sofa had an orange-green-gold floral pattern that all but begged him to cover it in clear vinyl. There were hideous, *hideous* lamps. The carpet was the sort of fashion atrocity that could only have flourished in the early 1970s.

He'd started renting the place, furnished, right after the divorce. It had belonged to a woman whose children had decided her Alzheimer's warranted her moving into assisted living. His rent had gone into the woman's estate to pay for her care. A couple years in, she passed, and one of her daughters had offered Bill first chance to buy the place before they officially put it on the market.

And now here he was.

He downed some more of the coffee.

Sure, he'd replaced things as they'd broken or worn out. And there were new electronics and appliances to his liking. But man, this was not the place to show a lady you were trying to impress. She'd probably ask if he lived with his mom. Or grandmother.

There were fixes for this, of course, but those required spending a ton of money and caring about appearances. And Bill Marshall was pretty sure he might be allergic to stuff like that.

Maybe at this point, Christina wouldn't care so much, either.

He'd have to wait and see.

The clock above his TV read quarter-to-seven.

"Fuck."

Bill splashed the last dark drops from his mug into the kitchen sink and went about finding a clean shirt.



A blu-ray case stuck up out of Christina's purse the day after the eggs and tortillas. The day after paperbacks and Bill's lap and confusion.



There was a lightness in her step as she pushed her way through the front door of the Haul Ash office; that heedless blustering forward of a person who suspects they're doing something stupid but has committed to it with an idiot glee all the same.

Her boss half-sat, half-leaned on the stool in front of the computer, his focus intense on the monitor as she hit the time clock. Not an eyebrow twitch or a word in greeting.

From all but burning her clothes off, to near cuddling, to flat out ignoring her. Did the guy maybe have an evil twin or something? Assholier Bill?

By the time she came around the counter with the case in her hand, the level of mental backpedaling had reached somewhere near *But I Thought Everyone at Work Was Going to Dress Up for Halloween* territory. She put the documentary down next to the keyboard anyway.

Bill did nothing, and Christina hovered. Click. Scroll. Click. She fussed inside her skin.

"Bill."

"Yyyyeah." He did that thing. The thing where the head begins to turn but the eyes aren't following it yet.

"I brought this." She truncated herself from saying 'I brought this *for you*', because that was too close to, 'Please, like me,' and Christina was squirming enough already.

"Oh." His eyes flicked at last to the colorful artwork wrapped around blue plastic. "Thanks."

Thanks.

She swallowed and mentally kicked herself. "You can bring it back whenever," she said. "No rush."

"Okay." Attention back on the monitor. A final trio of decisive mouse clicks, and then he stood. "Travis is not gonna be here until noon, I just found out."

The man hit her with a split-second of eye contact that snapped her world from black-and-white to color and back again. Other than tiniest squint of contemplation, as if Bill was trying to puzzle her out, Christina couldn't

read anything in the look. But she knew what it did to her and couldn't decide if she wanted to kiss him or kill him for it.

He lifted a set of keys from the board on the back wall, and then turned to scoop up the documentary in an arcing arm movement that ended just after an intentional-as-hell brush of his knuckle along her wrist.

*The fuck?*

"I'll be out in the shop."

The door to the back half thumped shut behind him. At least he'd taken the movie.

She hadn't even put away her purse.

*You are letting him do this to you, Christina Lee. He is paying you for whatever sick shit it is he wants, and you are getting sucked up in it.*

Bringing him little things. Like she was trying to date. Trying to flirt. She sneered at the empty office.

But why, why? She lanced the bitterness with a sigh and shoved her purse under the counter. He could've gotten laid yesterday, but he wanted to read? And ... hold her?

Her insignificant reality was starting to bend in on itself. From this vantage point, standing upright on the under-surface of water, she could see herself wanting his sick shit, too. Whatever he came at her with next.

She turned to the computer and made a little noise of disgust. 'Next' would be calling customers. And a long, *long* weekend ahead of her in the anxiety radius of one Bill Marshall.



If the weekend being jumpy around Bill had been long, Christina's Monday and Tuesday off trimming down brush at the back end of her granddad's property had been longer.

She'd fought her way through an overgrown lantana the size of a small bus with nothing more than a long-handled pair of pruners and an aggressive playlist snarling through her earbuds.

It had been a shame, in her opinion, to lose all the purple and white clustered flowers, but neighbor complaints to the county about vermin nesting in the yard were nothing her granddad could just ignore. Which really meant they were nothing *Christina* could ignore.

She could have hired someone to clear the overgrowth out, but any money she used for that would've come out of the funds for Denise, and the caregiver might be the last thread holding this whole mess together at this point. No, it was nothing a little of her own sweat—and blood, though most of the scratches were healed up already—couldn't buy them.

Her efforts had left behind a neat wall of woody stems that could re-leaf in their own time, and several massive piles of green waste she'd had to haul off in the Bronco. Even more important, it checked one more item off the never-ending list of things that needed doing.

Coming back to work on Wednesday in a skirt, as if she hadn't been sweaty and filthy and achy just the day before, bordered on the surreal. Hell—she rolled her shoulders—she was still achy. At least she could sit at the computer most of the time.

Bells clanked as a woman who looked about Christina's age navigated her way into the office. She had a cast on her left foot and ankle, and pivoted her way to the counter with the aid of a crutch.

"Hi there," Christina said. "Can I help you?"

The woman set her wallet and keys on the counter and leaned to retrieve a phone from her back pocket. "Yeah, how many days can I rent one of the box trucks for?"

"Well," she said, "we don't really rent them by the *day*. Are you moving a whole house?"

"Yeah, we have a ton of stuff."

Christina nodded and launched into her usual spiel about hourly rates and average truck loading and unloading times. The pivot of the woman's expectations showed on her face, but she was polite about it at the end.

"Okay." Her customer touched the screen of her phone, and then held it to her ear. "I'm just gonna see what my husband wants to do."

Husband. Christina couldn't imagine.

Jonah's Civic veered in off the highway. He parked and gathered his backpack. Slipped into the office and punched his time card.

The woman with the crutch gave Christina a polite smile and tried calling her husband again. Christina offered the best she could do for a smile back, and wished she'd had a third day off.

The scheduling gods *had* smiled upon her with the opening shift, however, which meant she got to go on lunch first. After her welcome but forgettable haze of filling her belly and reading in the breakroom, Bill took his, and then Jonah went last, leaving for fast food, as usual.

"You'd think he'd get tired of burgers at some point," she said to Bill as they watched Jonah go out the front door just after a customer.

"You'd think," he echoed, pulling an invoice off the printer. His eyes flicked to the counter, and he snorted. "That guy left his wallet."

Christina followed his line of sight. "Shit." She grabbed up the wallet and darted around the counter. Pushed through the door after the man in the baseball cap heading for his truck.

"Excuse me, sir?" Her arm stretched out in the afternoon sun. "Sir? You forgot your w—*oahh!*"

At her squawk, the man turned to see her go flying. The toe of her shoe caught the threshold. Pavement rushed to meet her.

Christina's palms landed on gravel, her bare knees on cement in a skid. The wallet went spinning out of her grip. She spat some words she ought not to have said in front of a customer.

"Are you okay?" came from the man as he jogged back toward the office, at the same time as "Shit! Christina!" came from behind her as Bill hustled outside. Her shin made an effective stop for the door attempting to swing closed in her wake.

"Fuck," she said through clenched teeth.

What she really wanted to do was stay on the ground and swear and cry, but that wasn't exactly dignified. Instead, she pushed herself onto her hip. Bill was already leaning down with a hand out, and she took it. Hauled herself to a stand. Tried not to show her underwear to everyone.

There would absolutely be bruises.

“I was going to say,” she said to the customer, raking her hair back over her forehead, “you forgot your wallet.”

He’d retrieved it from the gravel and was stuffing it into a back pocket. “Yeah, um, thanks.” Concerned, bewildered eyes looked her over. Bill hadn’t let go of her hand. “Uh, sorry ‘bout that. Hope you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.” She tried to reassure with a laugh. “Not the first time I’ve made a fool of myself. Probably won’t be the last.”

He chuckled. “All right, then. Well, be careful.” And got in his truck and left.

Christina took her hand back, avoiding any attempt to parse Bill’s extended grip, and assessed the damage. Her palms stung, but they weren’t bleeding—just raw. She brushed off bits of dirt and gravel. Her right knee, however, boasted a new red scuff where the concrete had shaved her bloody.

She hissed at herself. “Really, dumbass?” There was little she hated more than being klutzy in front of other people.

“We got stuff in the back,” Bill said. “First aid kit. Come on.”

In the back half, her boss was hauling a small plastic container with a red cross on it out from the cupboard under the sink.

“Sit down.” He jerked a nod at one of the folding chairs while he pawed through the contents of the kit.

She frowned. “I’m capable of putting a bandage on myself, you know.” But sat, anyway.

He came at her with a handful of supplies and took a knee next to the chair. Set aside on the table what she considered an overkill of items for a skinned knee.

He started dousing a cotton ball in iodine. “It needs to be disinfected. Probably got all kinds of dirt and crap in there.”

“For fuck’s sakes, Bill.”

She leaned forward to stand, but he took a firm grip on her ankle. When her eyes snapped to his, those brows had come down, more serious than she knew what to do with.

“Stop being a pain in the ass and let me take care of you.”

Dropping a sandbag on her lap would have been less effective. Christina sat back, limbs going slack.

Take *care* of her?

She sucked in air through her teeth when he started dabbing the scrape.

What kind of shit was that to say? Why did it feel like her ribs were caving in? Why did she hate the part of herself that wailed from a sequestered place in her head, *Yes! Take care of me! Someone, for the love of fuck, please, please take care of me for once!*

But not just ‘someone’. No.

Bill stretched a fresh bandage over the stinging red part of her knee, smoothing both sticky ends down over her skin on either side with his thumbs. His touch slid to the back of her calf. Eyes wandered.

“What happened there?” He nodded to a bruise on her thigh, opposite the knee she’d just sandpapered.

She made a face. Fucking skirts, for him to see all this shit.

“I was helping my granddad on my weekend,” she said, keeping her answer minimal. “Clearing some brush.”

Christina avoided going into the hoarding thing with people. There was either judgment, as though she ought to be doing more to ‘fix’ him or the whole the situation, or just loads of advice ranging anywhere from unhelpful to outright horrible.

He let out a *huff* that was close to a chuckle. “Don’t you ever take a real day off?” Fingertips grazed the underside of her thigh.

“No.” So serious, too, but it was like they were having two different conversations at once.

His eyes shifted to the leg he hadn’t let go of. To where it disappeared up under her skirt. She gripped the seat of the chair on both sides, trying not to collapse the tension in the room like a soufflé with any sudden movements.

The list of things Christina would have found acceptable for her boss to do just then was long and embarrassing.

The bells on the front door clanked.

Bill gave her calf a squeeze. “Try to stay in one piece for me, will ya?”

He shoved himself to his feet and disappeared through the door to the front half.

Christina sat, trying to slow her pulse, and having a serious internal debate over the nature of reality and fantasy. About what sort of judgments she ought to place upon herself. About the half-life of conditions she could only pretend to understand.

Something was going to break. *Someone.*



Two o'clock in the morning was as good a time as any to masturbate. Not like she had roommates to worry about waking.

Christina had concerns.

Some of them involved the simultaneously growing and shrinking clusterfuck with her boss. Some, her lack of sleep over the last couple weeks. And some debated whether it was wrong to be giving serious consideration to buying a more expensive vibrator.

She was about to wear the little cheapie one out.

There was no pretense at all anymore. No hiding it. Christina thought about Asshole Bill Marshall when she wanted to get off. Which, these days, happened with alarming frequency.

The small silver bullet ground over her clit as Christina sought that pinpoint of focus. Her knees fell wide atop the bed, sheet thrown aside, even that thin layer too much in the late-June heat. The cheeks of her ass flexed, pushing her mound up, up ...

Her head whipped to one side, mouth in a grimace.

*Come on, where are you? Where?*

Scenarios flipped past, gaining speed. Just after he'd put that bandage on her knee, Bill's hand sliding higher on her thigh, under her skirt to her panties ... Not enough.

In the front half, right after she'd handed him the documentary, and his hand had brushed her wrist. But instead, the brush was a grip, a twist. He

was whirling her to face the counter, pushing a palm between her shoulders to bend her forward ... *Not enough!*

That very first time. Again. Always. Cock filling her full. Two fingers twisting into her ass. The blunt head of his prick replacing them, opening, stretching.

Yes. There.

The alternate version in her head didn't have her bewildered or mute like the first time, though. '*Bill,*' she said. Her back arched, and he came down to meet her. '*Christina.*' They broke rule number one.

*There.*

The spot. That liquid pulse revved up behind her pussy and topped out when it sped to a blur. Christina sucked in air through her teeth and came with a squeal that sounded like a question.

She let her muscles relax after, one by one, and the tiny vibe dropped to the mattress.

It was still there when her alarm went off, along with the rest of her problems.



After more than a week, the scrape on Christina's knee had all but healed. No need for a bandage now; the skin was just fresh and pink in that spot. It showed when she sat on the stool and the hem of her skirt rode up.

The calendar above the monitor in the Haul Ash front office told her it was Friday, the 22<sup>ND</sup> of June. She frowned at this and turned her focus back to the scheduling software.

There was no way it had been that long. What was it, somewhere in the beginning of May? When she'd lost her grip on the way things worked and asked for that first Friday off?

No. Asking for a day off hadn't qualified as her losing her grip. Agreeing to Bill's terms had. That was the point where a sane person quit their job. A



sane person, who worked somewhere big enough to have an HR department, reported that shit.

A sane person definitely didn't start enjoying it.

Christina eyeballed the overlapping colored bars on the screen and made a frustrated little noise. They were not going to have enough trucks this weekend. At least not for anyone else.

She glanced to the calendar again and her agitation grew. Not over the fucking schedule, of course. That would be sane person stuff. Nope, that was not her problem at all.

How long had it been? Since the shop? Since the reading?

*One ... two ... three weeks already?*

She had not started wearing her hair down for her health. Or bothering with lip gloss. Mascara. Not in the summer. It was amazing how a person could change their behavior without admitting just what the fuck was going on.

When the blue truck pulled into the lot and Christina's pulse leapt, however, she got a healthy and unavoidable dose of 'just what the fuck was going on'.

From the side of the building she heard the truck door slam, and then the outside door to the back half. She sat up straighter. Untucked her hair from behind her ears. Tried to slow her breathing.

*This is ridiculous.*

There was some clattering around in the back half, and then the door right behind her opened. By some narrow miracle she kept a professional gaze on the computer and didn't swivel around with parted thighs and open arms.

"You were right," he said, taking a hammer blow to her composure.

"Hm?"

There was a *clack* on the counter near her left hand, and now it was his turn to plunk the blu-ray case down. She'd almost forgotten about lending it.

Rather than drop the damn thing and back off, however, her boss's left hand slid over hers. Now she *had* to look at him.

“I said you were right.” A thumb brushed her knuckle. “I *did* like this one.”

For the most intense two seconds she could imagine, Christina’s brows furrowed. Her mouth came open. Then, containment was over.

“Bill, what the fuck is going on here?”

“What do you mean?” And she saw it. “I’m just bringin’ your movie back.” That twitch of a smile, a gathering at the corners of his eyes.

He knew. Bill Marshall knew every bit of fuckery he was laying down on her.

His touch whispered up her arm and he leaned in; took a long breath right next to—was he smelling her goddamn hair? *Sonofa*—! The exhale was some long-suffering sigh and his fingers trailed along her shoulder.

And then he was gone, stepping out through the back half again.

Christina let the tension in her spine loose and shuddered.

A new vibrator it was, then. This fucker.



Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Bill promised himself as he fled to the shop, one documentary lighter and tenuous control at best over a growing erection.

He needed to start down his work list for some of this equipment or he'd lose his shit. The self-torture had to be worth it. It *had* to. He was ready to cram his dick into damn near anything that moved.

The only consolation prize was being able to torment Christina right along with his own stubborn self. And it was working, too. The look on her face when he'd done no more than touch her hand ...

Tomorrow. She'd play along. He was sure of it.

On the shop floor, in front of the workbench, was a box of parts they'd just received. Belts, hoses, a couple sets of brake pads. He went for a box cutter and grumbled when it wasn't in its normal spot. Sometimes it seemed to Bill Marshall he was the only person in the world who put things back where they went.

Midday sun lit the space through the open roll-up door as he shuffled around hunting for the thing. He lifted some shop rags. Shoved some cartons of oil out of the way. Pretended he wasn't doing what he was doing.

Bill was playing games. He knew it, and Christina probably knew it, too.

At first it had just been an unbelievable left turn when he'd run off at the mouth like he shouldn't have. You didn't talk to a woman that way. You just didn't. But when she'd floored him and agreed, well then ... then it had become some sort of challenge. Some fucked-up piece of one-upmanship. What *wouldn't* she agree to? At no point had she stepped up and said, "No, Bill, I'm not gonna do that."

Habits and ways of thinking from his past nagged him that this degraded her somehow. Her willingness to go along with his creepy shit made her less. But the reality in front of him *right now* told a different story.

When Christina had managed to get hurt, even if it was only a skinned knee, Bill had wanted to literally pick her up and carry her into the back half. Nothing bad, he'd decided, should ever happen to her again, and that was pretty goddamn hypocritical considering *he* was likely to be the main bad thing that *kept* happening to her. At least here at work.

What hump was he looking to get over? What final sign did he need to approach her in any realistic sort of way? It couldn't go on forever like this. Escalating until they both lost their minds.

There. On top of the twelve-footer's rear bumper.

*Because that's where the fucking box cutter goes, you guys.*

Bill shook his head and snatched up the knife.

Tomorrow, though. He'd know something, at least.



On Saturday, the phone kept ringing. Christina had to keep answering it and telling people who hadn't planned ahead there weren't any trucks available. Those same people kept bending her ear about What Kind of Way Was That to Run a Business, and she kept listening and offering patient apologies.

The tedium of service industry jobs was at times its own special hell.

There was one bonus coming in her weekend, though. Tomorrow was Sunday, which meant tomorrow was Bill's day off. She'd be able to do her job for one whole day without getting all fidgety every time her boss came around the corner.

Because today, like yesterday, had been a nightmare of that. It was late afternoon now and Christina was counting the hours—no! The minutes—until she could assault that time clock and move on to less stressful pastures. Hell, even her granddad's hoarding didn't set her on edge like this. At least there, she knew what the deal was.

At least there, someone lo—

*Clank-a-lank.*

The bells on the front door snapped her out of her worry cycle. The mail carrier pushed her way in, unusually late for a Saturday, and handed Christina a stack of various-sized envelopes and ads.

“Thank you,” she said in that universal customer service chime.

The woman nodded. “Have a good weekend.” And was on her way back out to her white delivery truck.

*Good weekend. Right.*

Christina leaned on her elbows and started leafing through the mail on the counter. Sorting it into junk, things addressed to the business, and then a third pile for anything addressed personally to—

Bill was right fucking behind her.

And not like, *Oh, hey, excuse me. Let me get by.* He was invading-her-personal-space behind her. Right up against her back, palms coming down to brace himself on the edge of the counter, trapping her in the middle.

How had she not heard the door to the back half opening?

“Christina.”

The asshole practically *nuzzled* her name at her own ear. She wanted to whirl around and slap him, suck his dick, and possibly make out with him, and in who-knew-what order.

Instead, she tried playing cool.

“Bill.”

His name came out like she’d just run a marathon. So a fail, then. Still, she went ahead like opening envelopes was the most pressing matter at hand.

“When’s the last time?” he said, shifting behind her in a way that had nothing to do with equipment rentals or anything else that ought to be going on at the Haul Ash.

Christina let out a shuddering breath and glanced at the calendar, though she didn’t need it. Didn’t need him to elaborate either. They both knew this dance.

“Three weeks.”

She stuck her thumb under the flap of another envelope and tore it open lengthwise. His left hand came to her hip and fingers squeezed. Hauled her back against him.

*Jonah and Travis better stay the fuck out in the shop right now.*

“Then that means I got three hours saved up.”

The sentence was a wall, and Christina ran right smack into it. Bounced off, dizzy.

Three *hours*? She tried to recover. “You never said anything about banking time.”

He plucked the envelope from her hovering fingers and laid it on the counter. A warm touch skimmed up her ribs. More words melted where they shouldn’t have.

“*You* never said I couldn’t.”

Christina couldn’t help her mouth hanging open. So he was going to fight dirty, was he? She cursed herself for setting terms in such a stupid hurry. But that’s why it was called a Devil’s Bargain, wasn’t it.

Bill was reaching with his right hand for a pad of sticky notes; a pen. He brought both arms around her to start jotting something down, Christina folded against his chest in a not-at-all-work-appropriate embrace.

There were subtle shifts of muscle as he scribbled out the two angled lines of print. It brought her back to that lunch break on his lap, and she wanted to close her eyes and fall into it. To just give up, already.

But Bill was peeling the note from the pad. Pressing it onto the counter in front of her.

“This is my house,” he said, indicating what she now saw was an address on the yellow square of paper. “Nine o’clock tomorrow night.”

His *house*?

She slid sideways in the cage of his arms and turned to let him see the open disbelief on her face at last. He tapped the note with the address.

“Tomorrow,” he repeated. “And Christina ...”

She swallowed. Bill leaned close, intimacy overwhelming.

“Only if you want to.”

A final squeeze at her shoulder and she stood alone at the counter again, staring at the path away from sanity, written down on a piece of paper.

Bill Marshall wanted her to come to his house tomorrow. For three hours.

What could possibly go wrong?



Bill opened the side door and Daisy went out, but then turned around and looked up at him with confused eyes. *‘This isn’t the time I go out, Tall Monkey. I’m supposed to be sleeping in front of the couch right now. What are we doing?’*

He squatted to dog level and scratched the back of her neck. “I know, sweetie, but I can’t have your cold nose in everyone’s ass tonight. Go do dog things, and you can come back in later. Try not to rile the skunks.”

The furry face pummeled him with guilt, but Bill stood and shut the door. He checked out the window after her, though, and Daisy was trotting off into the yard. Which was fine, because he couldn’t worry about having to police the dog when Christina got here. He was barely going to be able to police himself.

Bill returned to his living room and surveyed his progress. All the surfaces were clean. He’d vacuumed. Sprayed some spray that helped the air not scream ‘bachelor’. Turned on only the least hideous lamps.

Put on music? What if she didn’t like his music?

If he hadn’t scared her off yesterday with his creepy boss routine at the front counter, Christina would be here in maybe ten more minutes.

He leaned backward and cast an eye down the hallway to his bedroom.

*Fuck.*

There was a box of tissues on his nightstand. She’d see it and think he used them for beating off. He was already striding toward the evidence, snatching the box up and shoving it under the bed.

Of course he beat off. Everyone did. Christina had done it in *front* of him, and oh god, he was going to right fucking now if he didn't get that image out of his head.

But some irrational part of him didn't want her to think about him in here all worked up and desperate, so he hid his tissues like a guilty teenager.

In the nine minutes he had left, Bill was going to have to stand around in his living room and coax his boner down.

*You have a plan. Sort of. Calm down.*

Unless she didn't show. But then he knew where the tissues were. He would just probably need them for crying first. Or maybe after.

He wanted this so goddamn bad.

*Calm. The fuck. Down.*



The Bronco escorted Christina down the highway to the far side of town. Road noise was the sole accompaniment to the catastrophizing going on in her head.

She could end up in a basement, putting the lotion in the basket. Daisy could sit there, staring and judging them the whole time. Everything might be a dream scenario and she'd catch feelings.

*Or maybe admit that you've—*

No. Nope. Not happening. Not that. Then, somehow, he'd win.

*And this is a fucking game?*

It was barely dark out at a quarter-to-nine, just days after the summer solstice. Most of the businesses along the highway, aside from the handful of fast food joints in town, had their minimal after-hours lighting on, and that was it. There was nothing to do in a town this size at this time of night, especially on a Sunday. Nothing but drive to Bill Marshall's house and get fucked.

Or whatever he had in mind. Her train of thought only rode on the tracks of *her* anxieties, not his.



There was no helping it. If he'd planned this, he was a pro. Because unless she was otherwise occupied, it had been all Christina could think about for weeks: Bill touching her. Convincing her to do filthy, nerve-wracking things. Pinning, spreading, filling her.

*Only if you want to.*

Yeah. She was going slide off the seat, and she wasn't even at his house yet.

When she made a right turn off the highway and shifted down into second, the skirt she'd chosen for the night whispered over her thigh. She wasn't even going to pretend anymore. Fuck it. Christina had gotten dressed with the sole motive of looking hot for Asshole Bill.

Her tank top and bra were black and shelved her tits for display. She wore sandals that would come off without a fuss. She'd bothered again with mascara. Eyeliner, and that *never* happened. And of course, there was the skirt.

He hadn't seen this one because it was way too short to wear to work. It was left over from her college days, white, and barely covered her ass. Beneath it, a white thong rode up and reminded her why she didn't wear thongs.

The feel of her bare cheeks on the seat of the truck warned her how deep she was in this whole thing now. Complicit. That was the word.

She started squinting at street signs, slowing down and trying to remember the series of turns the map had promised would lead her further back into the neighborhood. She could have pulled over and looked at her phone, but then she might just freak out, turn around, and go home.

Clearwater Drive. That was it. She made a left.

Christina snorted over the steering wheel. What if she'd worn all these revealing clothes, and then Bill just wanted to read again or play chess or something. Every encounter so far had been more sedate than the last. Maybe he was going to help her prepare her taxes this time.

No. Not after that invitation. The heat of him at her back ...

She shuddered and almost drove past the mailbox with the right address on it.

A concrete driveway led from the street to the front of the house, and Christina's belly tightened as she guided the Bronco to park behind his truck. She was here. Really here. Bill Marshall's house.

There were lights behind some of the window coverings. She stared at them like if she did it hard enough, she'd see right through to his living room, to Bill, right into his head and his thoughts. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

*You gonna sit in his driveway all night?*

She took in and let out a breath. Scooped up the tiny purse she'd brought. Stepped out into a gamble the size of nightmares.

*Or dreams. Dirty ones.*

His porch light showed her a brick ranch that might've been built in the early 60s. A tall pair of elms leafed out over the yard. Just as her first sandal came up on the front porch step, the door swung open.

The motion caught her off guard and Christina's weight shifted onto her back foot. Bill stood there, edge of the door in hand. She'd never seen him in anything other than his work clothes, but now he wore jeans and a navy blue tee-shirt. Fabric snugged around his chest and shoulders in a way that made her swallow to wet her throat.

"Hi," she said, the picture of eloquence.

Her boss did his own eye-fucking, gaze sweeping her from nose to knees and back again. His mouth quirked up in some distracted half a smile and he made a *chuff* of disbelief.

"You *are* trying to kill me with *this* getup," he said. "Jesus."

Her head ducked for an embarrassed second, but he was opening the door wider. Nerves seized her chest. Just another point of no return on this road. How many could there be?

She stepped over the threshold. Managed not to trip this time. He shut the door behind them and took up the hand that wasn't holding her purse. Their eyes met.

"Three hours," he said, a warning from under raised brows. *Last chance.*

Her teeth pulled at her lower lip. She rattled him a tiny nod and received a more deliberate one in return.

“All right,” said Bill.

There was a heartbeat in which she recognized a living room behind him, and then the wood of the front door was flattening her shoulder blades. All she could see was Bill, crowding her back, his hand releasing hers to slide up her arm.

Christina had time to draw a shaking breath. Both his hands now were skimming her shoulders, her neck. Thumbs came to her temples, palms cradled her face. There was nowhere to look but right at him, inches away.

His belt pressed into her belly. Brown eyes searched her features as though he was looking for the best way to carve Christina up and eat her. Her chest rose and fell.

Bill leaned in, mouth stopping a wish short of hers. Hovering. His breath fell, warm and promising rebellion.

*We aren't ...*

He sheared away from disaster and pressed his lips just above hers, just to the right of her nose.

*We aren't supposed to ...*

It was a kiss, and he ducked around to place another like it on the left side.

Bill pulled away just enough that her eyes could focus, and brought a thumb to trace her lower lip. Descended on her again.

“Bill.” She was breathless when he missed her lips by an eyelash, landing instead on her chin. “What are you doing?”

Her boss damn near growled and checked her body against the door again, somewhere between aggression and frustration.

“Not kissin’ you on the mouth.”

Instead he was at her temple, her ear, her jaw. Lips, teeth, and tongue. A hand stole to the small of her back and clutched her to him at the hip.

“Fffuck.” Christina’s eyes rolled back.

Her purse clattered to the tile.

The onslaught was too overwhelming for her to pay attention to her arms coming up to circle Bill Marshall for the first time. He was lapping at the

hollow of her throat, dragging his teeth behind her ear. Another hand cupped and pushed her breast high, then rose with hooked fingers to drag the straps of her top and bra down her shoulder. More kisses fell there, delirium spiraling.

She clutched at the back of his neck. An erection ground between them. Her knee slid along denim, and a rough hand caught it up, dragging it higher, a first taste at spreading her open.

Christina rolled her hips, shameless, and curved her spine to push the well of her cleavage into the path of his attention, but Bill had no patience.

He pulled her away from the door and, somewhere amid the violence of his claiming mouth, began to walk them backward.

After maybe half a dozen steps where she tried not to tangle her feet with his, tried not to stumble while squeezing hands possessed and a hot mouth destroyed her equilibrium, Bill met some barrier and stopped. Slid out from in front of her, leaving Christina wobbling to stay upright.

She was staring down a length of awful floral upholstery. The padded arm of a couch was at her knees and fingers splayed over her back.

“Now.”

One molten word at her ear and instant compliance. She bent forward, palms tufting into cushion, firm sofa arm bolstering her hips. Pussy throbbing.

*Damn, right to it this time.*

Not one single part of her was complaining.

He was back there where she couldn't see, but right away there were things to feel. Her skirt flipped over her ass. Air brushed her cheeks.

“*Fuck me,*” said Bill. Fingers traced her thong down her crack, slipped over her covered mound.

She relaxed forward, accepting his touch, folding her arms under the side of her face atop the cushion. In a minute, she'd be full of dick, and Christina was ready.

Until she heard a twinned thud, muffled on the carpet behind her.

Palms cupped her ass. Squeezed and spread. Cotton-covered pussy was warm. Too warm. The second her eyes snapped open in realization, his

mouth was on her.

Fabric in the way and everything, nose and chin burrowed. A brief clamp of teeth made her gasp. She should have saved it for when he closed his mouth over her lips and sucked.

Damp material clung between her legs, and a tongue wriggled it between every crevice. Somewhere in the background of sensation, he slipped her sandals off, fingers trailing her calves and ankles on the way.

When her hips began tilting, searching for more, he was already peeling her panties down her legs. Looping them over one foot, and then the other. Gripping hands on the backs of her thighs were Christina's only warning.

Bill's tongue lapped straight up her center, splitting her lips and rasping her clit in one long pass.

"Uhmyghod." Her groan slurred into upholstery.

Asshole Bill Marshall knelt behind Christina and ate her pussy.

Sweet *fuck*, did he eat it. Like there was an expiration date of *tomorrow* tattooed in her crack. His tongue was everywhere: circling her clit, squirming into her hole. The arm of the couch held her up and open for him to suck at her cunt with hot, sloppy kisses.

Her toes were barely keeping contact with the floor, and then there were fingers. First one, testing the perimeter, stroking the silk of her opening while she panted. Then a second, pairing, slipping through cream. Penetrating.

"Mmyeah."

Her face was sideways, probably drooling into his couch. Bill fucked the two fingers in and out of her at a slow churn. Brought his mouth back to her clit and latched on, pulling in a rhythmic suckle.

"Bill, ffuck!"

On and on it went, until the pace of her breath had dried out her throat. What felt like a thumb replaced the work of his mouth. Pressure found her little bundle of nerves and rolled, manipulating blood flow. Christina groaned and humped at padded wood.

Then something wet and agile darted between her cheeks. Kissed up against her pucker.

“Nngh!”

So fucking wrong, and oh *god*, so good. Filthy and somehow humiliating, he worked her like the basest of machines. Everything wet, stimulation escalating from too many places at once. He forced the wriggling muscle past her tight little ring.

“*Bill!*”

And that was how Christina came: her boss’s tongue violating her asshole, his fingers squelching into her pussy, and one insistent thumb owning her clit.

She squealed and bucked. Her knees bent. and her feet pointed up at the ceiling. He rode along, following her body with mouth and hands so there was no escape. Every clutch and pulse poured out at last around the man who’d been upending her world for at least a month and a half.

*Now he’s upending you over his couch.*

Christina worked at slowing her breath as she came down. Pins and needles prickled her toes, and Bill took his fingers back, tongue dipping with slow care to lap at swollen pink, to make sure he’d tasted every last flutter and jerk.

When there were no more, the heat of his face withdrew. A part of her still capable of higher thought pointed out how it might be more dignified if her ass wasn’t in the air, but the rest of her was sure her bones were made of overcooked pasta. She let her grip uncurl from patterned fabric.

There were footsteps and Bill’s jeans came into her line of sight, just at the knee. A quiet chuckle drifted down, and fingers combed the mess of her hair back from her face.

“You don’t have to stay like that,” he said.

She twisted her spine so she could find his face above her. His features were soft, as though he’d found her there sleeping and needed to convince her to move somewhere less awkward.

*Like a bed?*

Bill smiled. Not a half-smirk. Not a twitch that might be confused for a grimace. Smiled. Eyes, too. “I’ll be right back.” And he moved off down a hallway.

Christina groaned at the ache in her hips from the arm of the sofa and pushed herself up on her palms. Slid back to sit on her now bare heels. The sound of running water came from somewhere deeper in the house.

The left side of her top and bra straps still hung around her upper arm. She righted them, but wasn't sure why. Her panties could be anywhere.

*So that's what it's like. Wobbly legs helped her stand. That's what it's like when Bill makes me come.*

She collapsed onto the couch, hands upturned on her lap. Her thighs still closed together around a faint buzz. Dazed and floating, she swiveled her head to take in the room. Where had those lamps come from? This sofa. An old lady garage sale?

*Fuck furniture, Dodd! You just came all over Bill Marshall's face!*

Christina found herself wearing a stupid grin. The boss had been holding out on her.

The boss was shirtless, appearing again at the end of the hall. Her throat went drier than it already was.

An undershirt the day she'd taken his cock in her mouth was one thing. A suggestion, though it had been more than enough to fuel her fantasy life. This was reality. This was planes of muscle, a dusting of hair she might reach out and touch.

Dear god, she wanted to touch.

And their three hours had only started.



Bill scrubbed a washcloth over his face and under his arms in a quick recon. His shirt was on the bathroom floor.

*Did you fucking hear her? Did you?*

Those noises had been insane.

He tucked a hand into his pants and shifted a half-hard cock up into the waistband of his boxers. Leaned on his palms on the edge of the vanity and blew out a slow breath in front of the mirror.

Making Christina Lee Dodd come was impossible fantasy stuff. If someone had told him two months ago he'd be burying his face in her pussy? That she'd yell out his name, and not in a *What are you doing? Get the fuck off me!* way, but in an *Oh god! I'm coming!* way? Bill would have either laughed or decked them. Possibly called them a perv for saying creepy shit like that to a stranger.

There were things he still wanted tonight, but god *damn*. He'd already accomplished the most rewarding, without a doubt.

On the way back out through his bedroom, he swung by the nightstand and fished out a condom. Stuffed it down into his back pocket. How much further they'd go depended on her, but Bill would be ready.

By the time he got back, she'd collected herself enough to sit, face flushed, and to stare at him with some expression he couldn't read. Bill returned the favor, steps halted while he still processed what had happened on that same couch only minutes before.

He blinked to shake off the awkward tension. Pushed a hand back through his hair. "You, uh ... you want some water?"

She nodded at him, her eyes not leaving his, and Bill made a silent, internal fist pump at what he hoped was an orgasm coma keeping her from



actual words.

*Unless you did something wrong you're too stupid to notice.*

He went to the fridge for a bottle of water, and brought it to her, arm outstretched. She took it, unscrewed the lid, and gulped down an impressive amount before sighing.

“Thank you,” she said, and then held up the bottle, offering.

Bill took it and downed another third of the thing. Set it aside on the coffee table.

She looked vulnerable, sitting there now, watching him like a prey animal, as though he might change tactics and do something horrible.

*Sit down, asshole, you're freaking her out.*

He sank to the couch beside her. “Are you okay?”

Her brows came up and she gave him a deliberate circular nod, paired with wide eyes. “Yyyeah.”

Bill thawed; she was more than okay. He took up her hand. Squeezed it and kissed her knuckles in some weird old-timey gesture he hadn't planned. But Christina probably hadn't planned it either when her fingers slipped from his and came to touch the side of his face.

There was nothing left in the world for him but those blue eyes. It wasn't awkward or weird. It was an event horizon, and he was gone.

He leaned first, but she followed, giving him her throat. Dear god, did he just want to stop playing around and kiss her, but they had an agreement. And Bill was not about to break trust with Christina. Not ever, if he could help it.

He tasted her skin again, warm and good-smelling, and she hummed under the work of his mouth. Her first hand had fallen, but the other drifted to the back of his neck, approving, pressing him to continue.

It was her weight that tipped forward first, shifting the balance until he braced himself on a hand. A heartbeat later, he got the picture and lay back on the couch, Christina following him down. Her hips settled between his legs, and Bill groaned at her weight. There was no way he was hiding his erection.

He got greedy again, and his palms slid down her back to find her ass and take handfuls. She hissed and ground, and Bill wanted to skip ahead twenty steps.

But there was so much he'd miss along the way.

They were shameless, there in his living room. Humping like two much younger people whose parents had left for the weekend and no one was going to catch them.

The soft flesh of her backside pillowed under his grip. He hooked his fingers under, where ass met thigh, and lifted, spread her. The skirt she wore had ridden up so his touch met bare skin. Then he ventured to her center and found her panties still gone.

"Fffuck, Christina."

She arched, pushing herself into his touch. "Mmm, yeah."

His fingers found wet again, and Bill was going to die. He wanted everything, all at once.

The smooth skin of her shoulders rode up and down in his line of sight and he jumped tracks. He already had the narrow straps of her top down when she pushed herself up on her arms. Sat back on her heels.

Even as she slid out of reach, Christina was crossing her arms, lifting her shirt up and overhead. She dropped it to the floor and he only had a breath or two to gape at her in a black bra, before she had a wrist behind her back, undoing the clasp.

And then there she was, nude from the waist up. In his goddamn house, too beautiful for anything around her.

Something important sizzled between them, some fierce acknowledgment of mutuality. He only had to begin lifting his arms for her to sink back down, bare chest laying over his. There were pieces of his psyche urging him to be romantic, but Bill was high as a kite on this woman, and the rest of him ran roughshod.

He groped her like a beast. Pushed his cock up against her mound, bit at her neck. She rose up again, just far enough to hoist herself higher over his body, demanding the attention she wanted.

*God, she fucking wants you. Christina wants you.*

Bill took palmfuls of her tits. Pushed them together and imagined his dick sliding there. Found tight little nipples and tugged, eating the hiss she made like dessert.

She must have seen his focus shift, because she dropped down on cue, letting her breast fall to his mouth. Her fingers threaded behind his head to curl in his hair, and Bill thought he could die just fine, smothered like this.

Somewhere in the suckling, the nuzzling, fingertips traced his jawline.

“Bill.”

“Mm?” He was hardly coherent.

“Can you ...” Neither was she, from the sound of it. He left off to find her eyes, and the want there squeezed at his chest. “Be on top?”

*God in heaven.*

He wasted no time. In a jockeying of limbs over upholstery, Christina was there, looking up at him, thighs split around his hips while he wondered what kind of price life was going to make him pay for all this. She was Persephone to his Hades, sunshine all spread out and he wanted to do dark, horrible things.

His palm slid up over her belly, between her breasts and back down. He joined it with a second hand, and she moaned when his thumbs dragged a line down from her navel. The flimsy skirt was bunched around her waist, its only use now to remind him she’d chosen something hot to wear. Just for him.

Bill fell back down to top her, savoring the way his body locked her in, the way her arms came around his back. He had kisses for her throat again, her temple and cheek because no matter how much he wanted her tongue in his mouth, he wouldn’t break his promise.

She was rocking up onto him now, taunting his cock, and he was probably abrading her with his jeans. Bill shifted, weight on one arm, and risked the other hand to take down his fly, to bring himself out. When he settled back into that hot cradle, bare flesh on bare, hard flesh, Christina made a noise he couldn’t describe.

“Ohh, *fuck* yeah.”

Her words were a breath, and she rolled her hips, slicking his cock in arousal. Everything narrowed down to the wet slide of her pussy, the rise and fall of her breasts. All those shaking breaths she took, right there, because of him.

The sounds in the room were pornographic: hissing between teeth, animal grunts while they tormented each other. Her hands found his ass and she held him there, grinding. He lifted away just enough so the drag of his shaft was only a tease, loving the strain on her features to get the pressure back.

Her fingernails were in his lower back and Christina growled.

“Jesus Christ, Bill, just fuck me.”

She was lucky he didn’t nut right then.

His hand went back to find the condom. Brought it out so she could see, the heat of her words stoking parts of Bill that liked power.

“Yeah?” he said. “You wanna get fucked, Christina Lee?”

“God *damn* it!” She bucked against him, clawing his hips. “Yes, *please*. Now.”

He could’ve watched her beg for hours, but his dick overruled those games. He tore open the wrapper and had the condom out and rolled down his length in record time.

One quick thrust should have followed a race to the finish like that, but some part of Bill not ruled by testosterone made him pause. He hovered there, knocked at her entrance, palms poised on her thighs, ready.

Her ribs rose and fell, touch resting on his knees. Summer made the inside of his house warm, but she let out a shivering breath.

This was so, so different. The first time he’d been inside her, consent had been a technicality and Bill was probably going to hell for it. Second time, too, but he hadn’t missed her sounds, and all the other little ways she responded in the weeks after that.

Tonight she’d looked him in the eye. Asked. Literally pleaded. He didn’t know where they would go after this, but these three hours existed in a vacuum as far as Bill was concerned. They could both have the fantasy.

Rather than leaning down and shoving home, Bill lifted Christina by the hips. Began dragging her up his thighs.

Her eyes got big when the head of his prick pushed into wetness. Pushed and kept pushing. She was soaked; there was no need to strain or shift. He'd beat off forever to the image of her mouth coming open at the same, deliberate pace he impaled her.

When the well beneath her mound hugged in around his balls, Bill ground his teeth. Searched the backs of his eyelids for the span of a breath.

"God, Christina."

And then she squeezed him. Not with her hands.

It was over.

He did use his own hips, now, drawing back and sheathing again, grip keeping her tilted for him. She gasped at real motion and made that face only the naïve thought meant pain.

Even with the condom, it was too good, too tight. The sight of it was excruciating. Her lips flaring around him, pink and glossed. The way her eyelids fluttered each time he bottomed out.

He picked up speed, driving at a steady pace. Her heels bumped at his ass, and one of her hands rose to brace against the arm of the couch.

Christina's face and chest were turning red. When he brought a thumb to worry over her clit, the breath she was holding burst out in a groan. Her ass flexed on his thighs in a move to push herself higher into his touch, onto his cock.

What felt like an hour could have been seconds as Bill watched her breasts bounce, her swollen mound writhe. Here was his perfect Christina, impaled like some primitive sacrifice, but it was real. Then and there, he was sure of it. No couch that ugly existed in anyone's fantasy life.

Bill fell forward, overwhelmed, arms bracing him above her. The new angle fit her tight against his hips, and he wasted no time rooting down into her cunt. Blue eyes rolled back, and nails dug into his forearm.

"Oh God, Bill, like that." Her knees came up to rake his ribs, to open her body for more. "*Pleeease* like that, fuck me. Fuckhh ..."

The last of her demands got lost in jostled breath, but who wouldn't follow orders like that? He sank down on his elbows, pinning her, lighting a storm of sensation as more of their flesh came in contact. His urge was to assault her throat with his mouth and to fuck, but seeing would be worth the self-control.

Bill held himself where he was, eyes rapt on every twitch of her brow, every shift of her jaw. He buried his cock home again and again, praying he wouldn't drip sweat on her or anything else stupid to ruin it. God, she was beautiful.

His right hand slid behind her neck to cup the base of her skull. Somehow the way his thumb brushed behind her ear made her feel breakable. Precious.

Her mouth came open with her breath. Fingers splayed on his chest as she urged him to take and take. To use and be used.

The thought tore something loose in Bill, and the work of his hips sped. Christina felt it and growled through her teeth.

"Fuck yeah, *hard*." She met his thrusts, pussy slapping his groin. "Do it. *Do it*."

It turned out any sort of dirty talk from Christina at all was way more than Bill could handle. The rush built behind his balls and he raged into her, pounding. In seconds, his universe narrowed to blinding totality, jetting the length of his cock, pumping her full of warmth.

Well. Pumping *latex* full of warmth, but he didn't. Fucking. Care.

"Christina, god *damn*."

He strained through the last of it, sure he was making some awful face above her, but the woman taking him in only cooed encouragement, hips rolling with his final surges. Her touch was everywhere, soothing, accepting, from his shoulders to his arms to his waist.

When he came around, she was a mirage of blonde hair and reddened cheeks looking up at him. Smiling.

There were zero reasons he deserved this.

Bill drew fingers over her chest, her belly. He wanted to collapse, but made the effort to sit back up, instead. Before he did something disastrous,

like kiss her.

He met her smile. Pushed his hair back over the top of his head. “Do you, uh—”

“Oh!”

They’d leaned far enough apart for him to slip out, and Bill chuckled at her reaction. She laughed with him, and he rubbed a palm along her thigh. The scene was excruciatingly comfortable.

“Do you want to take a shower?”

Christina cocked her head and squinted her eyes at him, before her lips turned another smile. She nodded, as though accepting some challenge. “Okay.”

What would happen after, Bill wasn’t totally sure. As they untangled limbs and polished off the last of the water, the condom started losing its hold. He’d already gone one round for the night, and it was anyone’s guess how soon he’d be ready for anything else.

Not that he didn’t want anything else. *Everything* else. But *she* had to want it. He’d drawn a line in the sand. He was tired of being a creep.

They stood, and she trailed him out of the living room, down the hall to the bath, still only wearing her rumpled skirt.

He dropped the condom into the trash and slid open the glass of the shower door. Cranked the water on to let it get hot.

Christina’s fingers traced the edge of the vanity, the image of her, topless in his mirror still something out of a dream. She smirked, eyeballing the room. “Wow, you got the whole pink-tile Nana-bathroom, huh?”

He nodded, pulling towels from a cabinet. “Yeah, I’m blaming that on the early 60s,” he said, still somewhat numb to the idea of letting her so far into his private life.

*You’d let her further, and you know it. Jackass.*

She was dropping the skirt to the floor and he forgot what he was doing. Sure, he’d seen everything now, but naked was naked. The way she chewed her lip after, as though she expected judgment, made him want to bite a knuckle. Instead, he shed his jeans and boxers, piling them atop her skirt.

Steam was wafting over the top of the glass now, and Bill stuck his hand around into the water.

*Good.*

When he turned back, Christina's eyes were on him, their appraisal frank. She flushed at being caught, but Bill distracted her.

"You want to get in?" He gestured at the open half of the glass.

She nodded and slipped past him, one foot lifting over the edge of the tub, and then the other, until she stood in the spray. He followed, pulling the door shut behind them.

Water started slicking her hair down her back. Running over her shoulders. It took him a beat to close his mouth and hand her one of the two washcloths he'd brought.

"Here," he said. "In case you want to ... you know ..." He made some vague gesture.

Bill's primary goal was to not be sweaty around her for the rest of their time that night. Having her nude and wet in front of him while he achieved it was a bonus.

She lathered her cloth, and then handed him the bar of soap with aching familiarity. As though it were something they did every day. He took it and got to work on himself, scrubbing everywhere he imagined might offend.

Christina went with more leisure, moving under her arms, the backs of her knees, between her thighs like it was some kind of slow, ritual dance. He was standing there like an idiot by the time she hung the rag over the door handle.

Blue eyes turned on him, and they were somehow bigger, deeper for the water now plastering the halo of her hair darker against her scalp. He was already at the far end of the tub, and she stepped toward him, fingers of her right hand coming up to draw through the damp scatter of hair on his chest.

Bill twitched a bemused smile. "Hi."

"Hi." She joined him in happy awkwardness.

A number of her wet, naked parts greeted him. The tips of her breasts flattened against his ribs, the long muscles of her thighs bumped his. She leaned in and stopped the descent of a droplet of water from his collarbone



with the flat of her tongue. Eyes flicked up and then she dropped to catch another. A slick touch drifted from his hip. She was cupping his balls.

Bill inhaled with a hiss and exhaled with a groan.

Christina massaged and tugged. One of his nipples caught her attention and she moved to lick, to nip with teeth. He jerked, and his shoulders met the shower wall. She kept moving. Down.

Right there. Right there in his very own house, Christina sank to sit on her heels. Her touch rose to his prick, and there it was, at eye level with her, nodding back to life like a champ.

That soft hand began to jack him, slow, but firm. She looked up at him with huge eyes, the humidity making the dark of her eye makeup blur and begin to run a little. Whatever Bill was trying to prove with tonight, he couldn't deny how pornographic it all looked, and his cock plumped further in approval.

Then she opened her mouth.

Pink tongue coated him from base to tip and, before he could even swear at the violent perfection of the sight, Christina had taken him in. The warmth of her palate caged him, and she fed his length down to meet her fist before pulling off, descending again.

“Oh, *fuck*, honey.”

Bill's head went back to rest on the tiles, oblivious of the endearment as she stroked him into her mouth. His hand came up on its own to rest atop her damp hair in some weird need to verify the reality. Yes, Christina Lee Dodd was indeed on her knees in his shower, worshipping his dick. Unprompted.

The touch of his hand signaled some shift, and her twisting grip fell to the side. Now, she worked him with the bob of her head, the suck of her hollowed cheeks. As he watched, mesmerized, the rush in Bill's ears built.

*Yeah, fuck.*

So good, he—

*Wait, no!*

“Christina.” He pulled his hips back and touched her shoulder.

She swallowed, chest pink from effort. “Are you okay?”

Bill let out a labored breath. “Oh god. So okay. I just didn’t want to ...” His arousal bobbed between them. “You know ... not yet.”

Her lips drew into a smile, and she gave him a slow nod. “Okay.” Pushed herself to stand.

“Not that it wasn’t fucking fantastic, what you were doing.”

The size of her grin had him wanting to just sign it all over.

*You are so fucked, Marshall.*



Christina scrubbed the towel over her hair in a final effort to minimize dripping, before wrapping white terry around her breasts and tucking it beneath her arm. The reality somehow still hadn’t touched her.

Drying off with Bill’s towel. Showering in Bill’s bathroom. Sucking Bill’s dick because damn, if she hadn’t wanted him in her mouth again.

And back there on the couch?

*Fuuuu ...*

Her boss had already pulled his own towel around his waist and meandered out into the bedroom—*oh my god, Bill Marshall’s fucking bedroom*—to flick on a nightstand lamp. The edge of the bed sank under his weight as he sat. The warm glow of the light and his watching eyes invited.

Christina hovered in the doorway, one hand on the frame as though it were the last touchstone of stability. The part of her that had nearly panicked and turned the Bronco around earlier tonight was still vibrating with nerves.

It was such a tiny part of her now, though. The rest of her, the majority, left clothing strewn all over Asshole Bill’s house. That part wrapped legs around her boss and begged to be fucked. That part pushed her out of the bathroom. Toward the man on the bed.

When she got near enough, he reached out with both hands, tugging her by the waist between his knees. Drops of water still beaded his shoulders, and Christina drew a path between several with a fingertip.

“Can I be honest?” he said, eyes climbing to her collarbone.

She shifted her weight onto the other foot. “Um. Okay?”

Bill gave a faint shake of his head. “You’re just ... too fucking much.” Brown eyes met hers. “I have no idea what to do with you.”

Her mouth twitched in half a smile. So. Validation. He was being driven just as insane as she was.

*Good.*

“I think what we *been* doin’ is just fine, Bill.”

His chest rose and fell at this. “Yeah?”

Work-tanned hands came up and pulled the wrap of her towel loose, and it fell in a damp pile at her feet. His eyes made plans, and the pause filled the space between them until it burst.

He snapped up one of her tits, nipple in his mouth, between his teeth. Even as she sucked in air, he had two handfuls of her ass, pulling her closer, spreading her for probably no other reason but that it made her feel dirty.

Christina whimpered when the suction became hard. Switched sides while rough fingers squeezed and plucked. Before she knew rhyme or reason, however, he was turning her by the hips. A yank and a shove had her back to him, and she looked her own naked self in the eye.

*This fucker ...*

Those same hands splayed over her belly, a good deal darker than the soft, pale flesh she saw in the mirrored closet doors. She swayed there on her feet, buffeted by the shock of seeing her nude body, and Bill touching it.

He scooped the damp rope of her hair over a shoulder, and then there were kisses along her spine. Wet, open-mouthed kisses while his hands roamed, first one clutching her breast, and then the other dipping between her thighs.

It was somehow intimate and eerily impersonal at once. She couldn’t see his face, but Christina sure as hell could watch the grope of his hands and match them with the sensations they inflicted. She was arching, widening her stance for the play of his fingers, when he locked his grip and hauled her back; down with him on the bed.

Her back was to his chest now, as he pulled them onto their sides. In the shift of position, Bill's towel had given way. An erection crowded her lower back.

He supported his head with a palm and a bent elbow, and Christina twisted her spine enough to meet the angle of his gaze. For a time, sobriety stayed well away and they wallowed in grinding, the mauling of her tits and teasing of her pussy.

At some point, his cock had slipped between her closed thighs, and she rode the length of him, letting the fat head burrow along her slit. There was something sweet about enjoying the torment of pantomime. No one was in a hurry; no customer was going to interrupt them. There was plenty of time for games, and no losers when it came to seeing which of them could best torment the other.

When Bill slowed his movements at last, Christina let some of the tension out of her legs and reached down to massage the underside of his prick. He hadn't stilled entirely, but she felt lips brush her ear and the softening of his touch at her hip.

The reflection those few feet from the bed was mesmerizing—her bare curves laid out on Bill's bed, his face and shoulder rising from behind her.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

Christina made eye contact with the mirror instead of twisting her neck. "Okay."

Fingers smoothed over the crease where her thigh met her body, and he settled closer to her back, if that were possible. The man was *snuggling*.

"The, um ... the first time you and I, you know, in the back half ..."

*No, come on. Don't be sweet and cute right now. I can't take it.*

"Yeah?" She slid her hand over the top of his.

"I mean, it was ..." His top foot insinuated between her ankles, and then his calf, his knee was between hers. "I know it was way inappropriate for me to ... ask you for something like that."

Now it was a whole thigh, in addition to his cock, and some enticing loss of control that came from the subtle way he splayed her.

"I said 'yes', though."

“You did,” he said, “but ... I shouldn’t have.” He moved his free hand up under her arm to her breast, gathering, weighing. “But there were times, I mean I couldn’t see your face, but ... did you ... did you *like* it at all?”

How was this prick sounding all insecure and needing-of-reassurance when she was lying here glazing his thigh like a Christmas ham? And more, how did he go right to the heart of her own struggles, just like that?

Christina turned her head, at last, the Bill who wasn’t a reflection coming into her periphery.

“I didn’t want to,” she said, quiet now. “I mean, I *did*. Start liking it. I just ... felt like I wasn’t supposed to.” Her brows came down, even as his thumb brushed over her nipple. “You kicked my feet apart.” She wanted to get this *out*. “And then I found out you were a cop? I don’t know ...”

The pink little bud was happily suffering the absent tug of his thumb and forefinger now, and Christina couldn’t help her eyes closing. Her backside pushing against his warmth. But Bill still had plenty to say.

“It’s hard for me not to read into stuff”—the tug became a tighter grip, a twist and she sucked in air through her teeth—“but there have been times I ... when I’ve gotten a little rough.” He let go only after her mouth came open at the singular focus of pain. “And I worry I go too far, but ... the way you react, it seems like ...”

Had she been that obvious? Christ, the man read her like a fucking book.

A book he was cracking wide open by propping up the knee he’d installed between hers. She spread with his movement, and the crafty bastard took full advantage. His touch was back, exploring wetness, teasing her entrance. Christina tried to get her head together. There was no point in confessing if she was incoherent.

“I like what you do, Bill.” The tip of a finger nudged inside, but she kept going, distracted as all get-out. “I don’t think it’s ... a thing I *normally* want?” He decided he needed to kiss her cheekbone at that moment, and she lost a moan before she could finish.

“But ... it’s *you*,” she managed at last, “and I like when you just ... have what you want.”

There. It was out. Bill Marshall now had proof she’d been enjoying every damn thing he’d done to or asked of her. If he was going to judge her,

or god-knew-what, well then there was nothing she could do about it.

His hand slid further along her cleft, arm curling in around her waist with his reach.

“And when I wanted more?” His voice had dropped an octave. A fingertip traced the pucker between her cheeks, and her eyes came open again. “Did you still like it?”

*Wow, he is really gonna make me say everything.*

There were a lot of things Christina would have been happy for Bill to ‘make’ her do, at that moment. The pressure increased, and she squirmed as her ring dimpled under his touch.

“I don’t really have”—Christina inhaled when he pushed past resistance with a slick finger, and tried not to lose the thread of her thought—“anything to compare it to, but ... yeah.” He bobbed in and out, and she whined. “I did. I was actually pretty pissed I didn’t get to come.”

Bill stopped, lodged there.

“Wait, you’d never ...?”

“I mean, you know, a *finger*,” she said, rolling a nod to the obvious.

“Christina ...” The invading touch stroked, moving deeper. “You gave me your virgin ass?”

“Well Jesus, when you put it like that ...” Her words came at a breath now. She had zero self-control whenever Bill Marshall decided violating her was on the menu.

“Fuck, why didn’t you *say* something?”

She could have laughed. If he wasn’t in there making her feel filthy and vulnerable. Her boss sounded both aggrieved and turned on at once at the idea he’d taken that from her without asking questions.

“I could’ve said ‘no’.” She could’ve done a lot of things. But she’d bent over and let him pick where he’d wanted to come, hadn’t she?

“Nngh, *god*.” His hips rocked forward, and he bit her shoulder. “And you’re telling me you *like* it when I have what I want?”

And the momentum crested the hill. She let it roll her.

“Yeah, I do.”

“And if I want it again?” He humped his erection along her inner thigh, voice gone all husky and aggressive. “If I want to push all this up inside your little asshole?” His finger rooted for punctuation, and Christina arched her neck back, hips writhing.

“Oh, *fuck me*, yes.” She was his, delirious. “You can have whatever the *fuck* you want.”

“Fuck yeah.” His response came ground between teeth.

For a time, there were just her small noises, their breathing as he plumbed into her in anticipation. One finger became two, and she gasped. Memories of the first time he’d readied her that way had her leaking cream, the heel of his palm smearing it between her thighs.

Just when she started to lose sense of time and place, Bill withdrew the touch. Hot, hard man slid between her cheeks, grazing her confused hole. She snapped back to the present.

“Do you have lube?”

She felt him nod at the back of her head. “Nightstand.”

It hadn’t been horrible the first time, but there was no sense in skipping the option to make it better. Christina leaned out over the edge of the bed, his circling arm keeping her from falling off while she reached for the drawer. Her fingers closed around a small bottle.

She righted herself and passed it back to him, watching the mirror as he snapped the lid. Something about the sight of his fist slicking down his shaft made her heartbeat thump. Ill-timed curiosity loosened her tongue.

“Have you ever ... thought of me?” she said. His eyes came up, and she knew her face would turn red. “You know, and ...” Her nod indicated his strokes.

His face fell into some sort of helplessness. “What, are you kidding me?” he said. “Damn near wore the thing out.”

A smile sabotaged her face. They were a pair, then.

She draped her leg back over his hip. A forearm was between them, and she felt him aiming. Spreading lube with the blunt head of his cock. Her pulse fluttered.

*Again. We’re doing this again.*

The mirror withheld nothing. Her boss was at her back, her thighs wide for his access. Guilty fantasy on the verge of repeating itself, hard and ready to wreck her sense of right and wrong all over again.

*But it's right this time.*

"You sure?" he said, pressing hot flesh between her cheeks.

His fingers had worn down her body's reluctance. He was only nudging and she wanted the push. Wanted to pull him in. Her back arched and she centered on him, screwing her hips so there was only one direction he could go.

The ring of muscle kissed around the tip of his dick and began to open. It was right this time and she groaned.

"Oh my god, Bill."

It had to have been assurance enough, because he canted his hips and made a real effort. Much more than two fingers began to burrow into her ass. Christina's jaw went slack and brow furrowed to see their reflection: his stiff prick disappearing and not into her pussy.

Unlike that day in the back half, everything was slippery now. She dilated around him without friction, her wants overruling instinct to push, to accept him.

When the ridge of his head made it past her barrier, Bill pulled himself back, retracing the path, teasing so many bewildered nerves. She knew what came next and let him have it, the surrender to sensation so much easier when Christina could admit what she wanted.

He dipped in and out of her, just enough for a quick breach every time to get her whimpering. Just enough to have her hole opening and closing around him in a continuous dance, while his palm cupped behind her knee and held her thigh up out of the way.

And the minute his rhythm started making any sense, Bill switched gears and moved in only one direction: in. There were occasional minor retreats to spread lube, but now he had a mission, and that appeared to be getting as deep into her body as he could go.

She let herself take full, slow breaths as he worked increasing girth up into her rectum. Her cunt drooled at the feeling of being at capacity this



way. The idea that, once he lodged home, she could squirm and clench and push, and still nothing could stop him from holding her open. From filling and fucking her until he was done using her how he wanted.

The mirror showed when there was none of him left. Plump scrotum stoppered up against her cheeks. She reached down to feel it; to take in the reality of Bill Marshall hilt-deep in her ass. He groaned at her touch and his fingers dug into the back of her thigh.

“Ffuuck.”

He thumped inside her and she made some sound. Quiet. High-pitched. It was nothing compared to the noise that came out of her when he brought most of his length back through her entrance. And then invaded again. She whined, and he was only starting. Retreat and she was almost empty, save the plugging cockhead. Attack and she was full, wonderfully abused.

Retreat and attack, the cycle continued and she let him take. The arm she wasn't leaning on drifted behind her and up to the back of his neck. She held on, her breath coming hoarse as he took his time fucking her helpless channel.

On a long slide in, he growled in her ear. “You like my cock in your ass, Christina?”

No hesitation, and she pushed back, words flowing out in a rush. “I like your cock everywhere, Bill.”

“Yeah?” He grabbed her wrist and brought her hand to the back of her knee, passing off the burden so he could slip his fingers between her legs. Her pussy made wet sounds under his touch. “Here, too?” He found the other place she ached. “Should we fill up all your holes?”

Middle and ring fingers pushed into sloppy pink, and Christina was doubly full. Her eyes went wide, and she made some feral noise. Bill only sounded satisfied and went about stuffing her from both sides.

He sluiced his two fingers in and out of her now, squelching each time he plunged home. Her asshole opened wide around the fat prick drilling in obscene tandem.

There was no control left. Christina was just letting everything happen. She held her thigh up, spreading herself for him. Everything from her clit to

the crack of her ass soaked. Holes eager, swallowing, sucking, begging for Bill Marshall.

His supporting arm snaked under her shoulder and more fingers were in her mouth. She mewled and writhed, desperate and on the verge.

“Yeeaaaah, dirty girl, just like that.” He pistoned into her. “Take this cock.”

She took the cock. She took the fingers. Her clit took only the slightest graze of the heel of his hand and Christina exploded on him.

*Dirty girl.*

Some choking sound gurgled out of her and the hand left her mouth, trailing spit down her chin.

*Dirty.*

He rutted her ass, grunting, fingers in her pussy hooking upward to make her wail.

“Bill!”

She came around him, fluttering, milking. Body grasping with wet walls at anything he’d squeezed inside it. Blood pounded to her clit, and her hips curled, the clench of her muscles nearly forcing him out.

But Bill was determined, driving into her even past the tightening she couldn’t control. The frantic work of his cock reached the very first threshold of pain when his fingers withdrew to a wet grip at her waist.

“Fuck, Christina, where?”

She knew that tone. There weren’t even seconds.

“In my ass,” she said. “I want to feel you.”

He swore and slammed home, once, twice. Hard, male flesh kicked inside her, followed by hot semen coating the last few thrusts. Lube had been a help, but cum was raw. Decadent. He came down slow, dragging wetly in and out past her twitching hole.

Christina lay panting, everything between her thighs throbbing with her pulse, a twinge in her chest from the exertion of her lungs. Bill slid back in to the hilt, clutching her hipbone like his life would drain out if they

separated. His mouth was on her shoulder, her neck, her cheek, kisses everywhere but where she really wanted them.

It would be so easy to turn her head.

But then what? Break the spell? And when she admitted it out loud, how could she justify taking the money? How was she going to keep her granddad above water?

*So that's it. You're a whore then. Proven.*

When enough of his lust abated to have him slipping back out, Bill moved to squeezing, massaging with hands anywhere her muscles had bunched and flexed over the last few minutes. Her upper thigh, the meat of her ass, her ribs.

She rolled onto her back, her shoulder and hip nestled into him. Brown eyes gazed down, softer than she'd ever seen, and the kneading fingers came up to trace her cheek, down into the hollow of her throat. Christina swallowed, barely able to maintain.

Oh, yes. She would be Bill Marshall's whore. She would be anything to keep getting this.

The next errant kiss landed on her forehead. When he lifted his face, he had that look. Like he wanted to say something. He wouldn't. He never did when he got that look. And Christina didn't want to head down the road of trying to pry his thoughts out of him. That was for people in relationships.

Still, she smiled up at him. Ran her fingertips along his arm. She could have this right now.

"Bill ... that was ..."

He gave a grunt of amusement. "Yeah, it was."

The sole of his foot rubbed along the top of hers. His hand came to rest on her belly. Christina ducked her face into the crook of his neck. Closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of promises, so close.

When she woke up, the room was dark.

A breath pulled in through her nose. Pupils strained to dilate, to make out shapes in the dim light coming from the living room.

Of Bill's house.

She had fallen asleep in her boss's bed. The weight of his arm draped over her waist. They were both still nude. She turned her head, blinking toward the clock on his nightstand. Red digits spiked her system with adrenaline.

2:49 AM.

*Shit. Shit!*

No. There was no way she could spend the whole night. Forget the three hours. This was a whole other conversation.

She shifted her left leg off the edge of the bed, following it with the right, her body angling. When her upper half slid under Bill's arm, he hummed, groggy.

“ ‘Stina?’ ”

“Hey,” she said, voice quiet and straining to keep panic down. “I should get going.”

“Don't have to.” His words thinned through a stretch of his arms. “It's warmer under the covers.”

Christina groaned inside. Yes. Let's fucking snuggle with Asshole Bill. Let's just admit it's all over. Get up in the morning, have the world's most awkward cup of coffee.

“I have to get home.”

She extracted herself and stood, wavering on legs not quite communicating with her brain yet. Fumbled her way to the bathroom and felt around the floor for her skirt. There was no way she was turning the light on and facing down whatever she looked like in his mirror.

Her bra and top were still on the floor next to the couch, along with her sandals. There was no locating her underwear; he was just going to have a souvenir, that's all there was to it. Her purse lay where it had fallen by the front door, and she grabbed it up, other hand on the knob.

*You can't just run. That's even more weird.*

She sighed and padded back to the bedroom, careful not to bump into furniture and doorways in the dark. At the edge of the bed, she reached out a hand. Touched Bill's shoulder. He hummed.

“Good night, Bill,” she said. “I'll see you on Wednesday.”

There was no missing his hand catching hers and squeezing, even as she stepped away.

“G’night.”

She wouldn’t have been surprised if he was asleep again by the time the front door shut behind her.

The Bronco seemed horrendously loud starting up at that time of the morning, and she ground her teeth until she’d pulled out of the driveway. It wasn’t cold out, but her arms clenched tight against her body, knees stiff together as she navigated home.

Her own bed was less warm, but also less full of ramifications. Staying the night had been out of the question, but now that Christina was alone, there was nothing stopping her from rolling around in the rest of it.

Her night with Bill had been over the top. All expectations flew right out the window, useless when compared to everything that had actually happened. All the sex, yes, but it was like a dance, a language, and Christina was not used to that. She was not used to saying so much to another person without words.

And the few words there were? Somewhere in Bill’s questions, his dirty talk, she’d put together something more. He cared about how he was making her feel. There were hopes on his end for her satisfaction, her comfort.

*Don’t get too comfortable, Christina Lee.*

It was fucking late, though. She could percolate all this in the morning.

When she shoved a hand up under her cheek, settling in to sleep curled on her side, the scent of him drifted over her pillow, still on her skin. She breathed deep and retraced the feel of lips on her forehead. Slept on the fantasy of breaking rules.



## chapter 12

There were panties in his pocket on Monday and Bill couldn't keep the idiot grin from resurfacing on his face every half an hour or so. It was stupid, but he didn't care. Christina was off that day, and the reminder made him ... well, *happy*.

He sat on the counter stool cutting the week's pos, since her days off had shifted to the beginnings of weeks and Christina wasn't around to do it.

Travis had given him more than one side-eye that morning, and it was an odd poke at Bill's self-examination. Was he that cranky all the time for a genuine good mood to have people looking like they wanted to tackle him and check for a belly button?

But yeah. Yeah, he was. He'd heard it all his adult life.

Maybe life could be different, now. Possibilities he'd only imagined in vague and unlikely terms were flowering right in front of him. Who gave a shit how they'd arrived there. They were *there*. At least he was pretty sure of it after last night.

How to even talk about it, now that was another thing. Some of his grin faded as he shot emails off to vendors, but Bill nodded to himself. He could figure it out. Other impossible shit had already happened; he could get his brain and mouth in order, too.

Gravel crunched outside and he turned his head to see a smallish metallic beige SUV rolling into the lot. A woman got out, blonde, maybe ten or fifteen years older than him. Headed toward the front door, clanked her way in.

"Hello," he said, turning on the stool.

"Howdy." She pushed sunglasses off her nose and onto the top of her head. "You Bill?"

He resisted the urge to squint, wary. “That’s me.”

“I’m a neighbor of a girl you got workin’ here? Christina?” She put a tan purse down on the counter. “Well, her granddad’s neighbor, anyway. She says ya’ll rent leaf blowers?”

“Sure do.” He stood, relieved to veer into business.

“What’s the rate on ‘em?”

Bill laid out their pricing and terms by rote and printed a rental agreement when the woman decided to commit. He picked up the phone and dialed the shop extension. Travis answered.

“Can you bring up that leaf blower, please?” Bill said. “Twenty-one?” The woman was getting her credit card out.

“Yup,” said Travis. “Be right there.”

Bill pointed with a ballpoint to the places she needed to sign and initial, and then handed over the pen. She pushed the paper as far away on the countertop as her arm would reach, probably nearsighted, and started zig-zagging out her name.

“You know,” she said, eyes on paper, “it’s good to hear you’re taking care of her.”

He clamped down on a near cartoonish double take. “I’m sorry?”

The pen stilled, and the woman looked up at his tone. “Well,” she said, eyeing him, “she told me she got a raise. And damn sure if that little thing didn’t need it, bless her heart.”

“Why’s that?” Bill did not care for the bad taste on the back of his tongue.

“Well, her granddad’s one of those, oh what do you call it”—she slid her card toward him on the Formica—“people who can’t throw things away. Got a bunch of newspapers stacked up all over his house. Collects junk.”

“Hoarders.”

“That’s the word.”

He took the card and turned to swipe it through the machine, the knot in his gut twitching like an ugly cocoon.

“Anyway,” the woman went on, “he’s got it *real* bad. County’s been on him with all kinds of citations. Notices. Last time I talked to her, she said he had *no* more chances to fail those inspections. She told me she had to take a whole day off just to go to court over it. But I guess now that she’s got a little bit more money, she’s keepin’ him out of trouble. Hired some caregiver, comes over a few times a week.” She shrugged. “Seems like it’s gettin’ better.”

“Here’s your receipt.” He stapled the flimsy strip of paper to her copy of the rental agreement. His heart was assaulting him like he’d just run a sprint. “That’s good to hear she’s able to ... take care of her business. She don’t talk much about it here.”

“Well, maybe I shouldn’t be telling tales outta school,” she said, folding and tucking the paperwork into her purse, “but she’s a good kid. Ain’t nobody else got the patience for that old man. I sure don’t.” Her smile was less than apologetic.

Travis came in through the door to the back half, hefting the leaf blower. “Hi there.” He nodded to the woman. “This for you?”

“Sure is.” Her tone was bright, now.

“She signed everything already,” Bill said, barely present.

“All right then, ma’am,” said Travis. “If you want, I’ll help you put this in your car and tell you how it works.”

“Sounds good.” She turned her head back to Bill as they headed to the front door. “Nice meeting you!”

“Likewise,” he grumbled, in full return to his normal self. Perhaps the pendulum had swung even further.

No. Not ‘perhaps’.

He stared, unfocused, out the window, at Travis giving instructions near an open hatchback in the glaring sun.

What.

The *fuck*.

All his foundations washed out to sea like so much piled sand.

He’d only rationalized the start of this entire thing on the premise that if she was willing to sell herself for cash, it was somehow fair game for him



to act like an entitled, domineering prick. Regardless of whatever it might have evolved to, the whole structure was built on a lie. Willful ignorance.

*You didn't ask her one question, did you? You just saw an opening—literally—and inserted yourself. You're just what everyone says. A fucking asshole.*

And really? He hadn't seen even one clue that things weren't what he thought? She'd said she didn't have money for clothes. Quit college. Almost never went out for lunch. She was all scraped up from yard work at her granddad's place. He'd just isolated the incidents. Didn't bother to be curious about patterns.

He'd only been curious about how many more ways he could make her beautiful face contort like that.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

But if it was purely sacrifice, purely obligation on her part, what about Sunday? Everything he'd seen in her eyes, heard straight from her mouth?

*I like what you do, Bill. Because it's you.*

No. No, that didn't make it right. They were where they were because he'd, what? Manipulated her? Coerced? Self-loathing crawled over his skin.

Christina's neighbor was shutting the hatch on her car, nodding a final time to Travis.

Bill was a fucking storm cloud.



On Wednesday, Christina all but flounced into the Haul Ash on a cloud. Monday and Tuesday's aches from cleaning some of the horrors in her granddad's kitchen were pleasant reminders of being alive. She was opening the shop today, and Bill would be in at ten.

Was it wrong she couldn't wait to see him?

When his truck pulled into the lot, she ran fingers through her hair, in complete acceptance of the idea she was doing it to look nice for him. Why lie to herself?

She watched him park and step out onto gravel, vacillating between two or three different things she might say when he checked in behind the counter. Her pulse fluttered, ridiculous.

He veered right and headed to the shop.

Her shoulders fell, just a little.

*Whatever. This is his business. He has things to do other than come in here right away and flirt with you.*

She went back to the customer call list.

When she hung up after the fourth call, including two people who hadn't answered, her boss came in through the back half and Christina all but melted, turning toward him like a sunflower.

"Hi." The honeyed smoke in her tone, her smile, said everything.

Bill had his hands in his pockets, thumbs hooked over denim, and his eyes cut down and to the side. Her melting became deflating.

"Christina," he said, "I need to talk to you."

*Oh god. What. WHAT.*

He exhaled through his nose and managed to make eye contact. Scraped raw. That was how he looked. His mouth opened for at least a full five or six seconds before words cracked the silence.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Her forehead knotted. "Tell you what, Bill?"

"About your granddad?" That searching gaze sliced her laterally, Zoro with accusations. "That's why you needed the money, isn't it?"

Christina huffed, the obstacle course shifting right in front of her. "Yeah?" She stuffed her palms between her knees. "Does it matter?"

"Yeah, it matters." He was just the wrong side of too loud and she stood, some defensive thing springing to life. "I'm a fuckin' jackass." Bill made a sharp gesture and she flattened into the corner of the counter. "I'm takin' advantage of you! It ain't right."

Her face folded up and she glanced at the window. Now would be a bad time for anyone to show up. She folded her arms and turned back to him, the cliffside crumbling under her feet.

“Bill ... I *agreed* to this.” And why did it look like those words hurt him more? “Who the ... *fuck* are you mad at here?” She hissed the expletive in a harsh whisper, as though there were people around to hear.

“*Me.*” He’d raised his voice. “I’m mad at *me*, Christina. I didn’t ... I never ...” He raked a hand over the top of his head. “Look, we can’t do this anymore. It’s done.”

She coughed up a tight noise of consternation. And of all the twenty things she wanted to yell at him just then, the absolute worst one flew out of her mouth.

“But I need the money!”

His scowl could have bent mountain ranges in half. “I *know.*” He turned to pace into the office. “I know you do. I’m gonna leave it. The paycheck part ... it’s fine.” He stopped walking and swiveled his head to look sideways at her. “Just, I ... we can’t do the rest.” A sigh left through his nose. “I can’t.”

This asshole was picking *now* to get noble? Really?

“Bill ...”

Her phone vibrated on the counter. She ignored it.

He turned and eyed her cell. Raised his brows at her. Christina made an eye roll that involved her whole head and neck, and reached for the interruption.

The caller ID read ‘*Denise*’.

*Now fucking what?*

The one call she couldn’t let go to voicemail.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Christina, it’s Denise.”

“Hi.” *What? What? Hurry up.*

Denise hurried up. Christina stared at Bill, watching helpless as her entire universe tore itself to tatters, a wildly flapping tarp in a tornado. She let silence echo over the connection for way too long after the woman stopped talking.

“Christina?”

“Yeah. I’m heading down there. Thank you, Denise.”

She thumbed the call to an end.

Bill’s attention on her was complete. “Everything okay?”

*NO! EVERYTHING IS NOT MOTHERFUCKING OKAY! NOTHING IS OKAY!*

The lump in her throat felt like it was going to cramp.

“Bill, I”—she shook her head—“I have to go. Like, right now. I’m not gonna be back today.”

She brushed past him with her phone and purse, forgetting the time clock altogether. Her eyes were burning by the time she reached the Bronco.



## chapter 13

“Help me get my shoes,” her granddad said.

“Whaddya need your shoes for, Pops?”

The nurse walking past the open door to the shared room for the tenth time had Christina distracted. She looked back around at her grandfather.

“I’m ready to leave.” He was pushing his torso up from the hospital bed on spindly arms, mouth tight in concentration.

“You’re not going anywhere today,” she reminded him.

“Oh?” he said, halting in his attempts to leave the bed. “Why not?”

“Because you gotta *heal*, Pops.”

They’d revisited this conversation several times that afternoon while Christina was there to visit. Pale gold light settled in from the room’s single window that overlooked a staff parking lot. Her stomach rumbled, but the guilt over having to leave him again, with people who were busy, who weren’t going to be patient, had kept her glued, if shifting, in the hard plastic chair.

The woman in the next bed coughed on the other side of the separating curtain between the two halves of the room.

“I can heal up at home just fine.” He was sitting back now, though, if grumbling about it. A TV hung high on the wall, and a weatherman on mute pointed out an impending heat wave over a map.

Christina sighed. “You’re gonna need people to get you things,” she said, “while your hip heals enough so you can walk on it more. I’ve gotta work, and Denise can’t be there every day. And if something happens, you’re gonna be right back here, anyway.”

She hated this inversion. *Hated* it. The old man had taught her how to change a tire. How to make a particular whistling sound with her teeth that

he knew used to make her dad crazy. How to make cornbread and use a table saw.

He was the source of all knowledge during her childhood. The person who had the patience to teach her about hard work, and about doing right even when it was a pain in the ass, and no one would see, anyhow.

And now, here she was having to explain things to this man who helped raised her. Obvious things. Like *he* was the child asking ‘are we there yet’. She knew the pattern, and she hated it. Hated when people talked to old folks like they were children. Like they hadn’t lived and loved and suffered for decades already and hadn’t earned the respect of being spoken to like a peer. And it stabbed at her to watch herself slipping into that patter. Simplifying everything. Increasing her volume.

“Knock, knock.”

Christina turned to the voice at the door; one of the nurses she recognized was making his rounds.

“How you doing, Mr. Dodd?” The young man approached her granddad's bed.

Pops eyed the nurse with suspicion. “Oh, I'm alive, I s'pose.”

Christina stood and scooted back the chair. “Hi, I'm Christina,” she said. “I'm his granddaughter.”

“Hi. Jordan.” He pointed at his nametag. “Will you be helping out when your grandfather gets home?”

“Yup. I'm the one,” she said. “I'm the primary contact.”

“Okay, good.” The man was swapping places with her and moving around to the far side of the bed. “How's your pain, Mr. Dodd?”

“Eh. Only hurts when I breathe.”

Christina grew a half-smile and shook her head at her granddad's stock response.

“Well, we can get you another pill,” said Jordan. “How about I just check on this incision here?”

The accepted lack of privacy made her shift her weight to the opposite foot, awkward. “I'm gonna head home for today, Pops,” she said. “I'll be back in the morning, okay?”

“Okay, sugar.”

Leaving while he was distracted like that made her skin tighten.

*Coward.*

She could hear her granddad grumping at the nurse, even as she left the room. It murdered her every time she had to leave him here, but she was only one person.

Hell, she was *the* only person in this situation. Everything fell on her. Talking to the doctors and nurses. Dealing with the house. Still getting to her damn job, because none of this extra shit was going to keep the lights on at her place.

She'd thought about calling her cousin Lloyd, but if she could even get him to come up from Tyler, the best she might expect would be he'd come say 'hi' to her granddad in the hospital. Then they'd probably go get some lunch, and then he'd be off. Christina needed *real* help, and there wasn't going to be any.

The doctors acted like they were going have him discharged in another week, maybe ten days—although that seemed awfully quick for an eighty-seven-year-old man who'd just had a hip replaced. She needed to kick it into high gear on the hoard. He'd need a place to rest and *keep* healing after he came home, not have to be picking his way around a bunch of junk that might decide to fall on him. They'd be back to ground fucking zero, if that happened.

The sun burned her shoulders and arms in that humid way the skin really *felt* as she picked a route through the visitor parking lot. The interior of the Bronco was even hotter than the air outside, and Christina arranged the towel she'd laid on her seat back in place so her thighs wouldn't singe right off when she climbed behind the wheel.

Tomorrow would be the fourth of July. Air conditioning was a nice wish.

At least everything with her granddad was a distraction—if a horrible, inconvenient, emotionally draining one.

A distraction from that shit Bill had pulled.

“*Look, we can't do this anymore. It's done.*”

Right when she'd needed that fucking asshole. *Then. That* was the time he'd chosen to evaluate his goddamn 'role'.

Her knuckles were taut around the steering wheel as she turned right on the road that would lead her to the main highway.

*You 'needed' him, Dodd? Since when?*

What had she thought this was? This ... *whatever* between her and Bill. Enough to be scared of, at least. Enough to make her panic about almost having spent the night at his house.

But that feeling. That gold goddamn feeling the next day she'd come into work after the infamous Three Hours at his place. Right before the shit hit the fan, and she'd seen him with new eyes and a new heart, and pathways had been opening up all around.

Right before the universe had told her to go fuck herself.

Christina Lee Dodd didn't have nice things. Even a semblance of 'nice things' that grew out of twisted foundations she was trying to ignore. Best she remember that.

Sorting through piles of junk on her grandfather's property during a holiday was going to help her do it, too.



Neighborhood kids were already setting off firecrackers somewhere down the block while Christina put her shoulder into shoving open the last of the windows in her granddad's living room. Every window in the house she could reach, she'd wedged open as far as it would go. Better to air out the funk.

She picked her way back to the kitchen where she'd cleared one small bastion of space on the counter for cleaning supplies. People on those TV shows about hoarding always wore little disposable masks while they cleaned, but those things made Christina's face all humid. East Texas on the fourth of July was enough.

She did pull on a pair of work gloves, though. No sense reaching into anything gross or sharp. Or spiderwebby.



In the bedroom, Christina had already made loads of progress. The floor and bed were visible again, for one. And the closet door could open and close without anyone having to shift a stack of boxes every time. She'd managed all that while Pops had been in the hospital for his fall, and now the ensuing surgery.

Today was living room day. Today she'd widen a path from the bedroom to the front door.

Christina flipped on a beat-up little radio she'd found and set up on her tiny counter space. There would have to be music carrying her along, or she'd never make an inch of headway.

Boxes and bins stood in towers around the room. Cobwebs sagged from the corners of the ceiling. The air was still and hot, even at nine in the morning, and there was only one Christina Lee Dodd here to dig a way out. Pops had no one else, and it was the right thing to do.

She went to work.

Somewhere after a sweaty noon, she was dragging another reinforced trash bag full of nonsense to the dumpster she'd rented out at the street. Worry about rental fees and credit card debt could come later. There was no way she was making a hundred trips to the dump in the Bronco.

Hair fallen loose from her ponytail stuck to her forehead. Her arms were starting to ache from lifting and pawing through junk. Near the corner where her granddad's street intersected the next one, a couple kids in their early teens were jumping bikes over a pair of low makeshift ramps while their friends watched and hollered. When a blue truck stopped at the corner and turned, Christina looked away and heaved the bag into the dumpster. She needed zero reminders of Bill right now.

The sound of tires slowed, though, when it should have rolled past. Stopped in front of the house. An engine cut out.

She wasn't going to get a reminder of Bill, because it fucking *was* Bill. Stepping out of the Ram while she stood there, hands on hips, squinting into the bright sun, at yet another thing showing up to sap her energy.

"Bill."

Hi name was a question, an accusation. Confusion. Here he was in jeans and an Oilers cap that looked older than Christ, stuffing his keys into a front

pocket and making his way in her direction.

“Christina.” He stopped a few feet away, at the walk that ran from the street to the porch and gave her a nod.

“Um ... did you need something?”

Of all the times. There was just too much weight. Too many things to focus on, without this particular disaster jockeying for position.

“You, uh ...” He cleared his throat. Looked at the open front door of the house. “I’m guessin’ you need help. With this.”

She wanted to scream at him. She didn’t need his goddamn help. Hadn’t needed anyone’s help this whole time. And every time she got ‘help’ from Bill, it came with a price.

The rebuke rose up from some deep, angry place, long-ignored and well overdue, ready to scald him hairless, but it died in the back of her throat.

It *was* too much. She *did* need help. Even if it came with angst.

Christina’s shoulders sagged. She frowned. “I probably do,” she said. “Don’t suppose you brought gloves?”

He reached behind himself and lifted a pair of work gloves from a back pocket or maybe his waistband.

“All right,” she said, both resigned and incredulous at once. “I’m warning you, though. It’s not a pretty picture in there.”

Bill dipped a nod and followed her up to the house. “I been in places like this. Cop, remember?”

She did remember. Christina remembered every single thing about every encounter she’d had with Bill over the last couple months. In graphic detail. One thing she didn’t remember, though ...

“How’d you know where to find my granddad’s house?”

“Neighbor of his came in and rented a leaf blower,” he said. “She’s the one who brought up—well. That he was havin’ trouble.”

*Thanks, Carol.*

They passed through the front door and into the hoard. She’d made a dent, but no one else just wandering in would know it. To Bill’s credit, he made no comment about the state of things when he entered the living

room. He just stood there, gloves in one fist, eyes sweeping the space. The look was all logistics and no judgment, and Christina knew the smallest measure of relief.

“Sorry about what happened to him,” he said. “Always comes a point when ‘So-and-So fell’ starts being a lot worse news. When you hear it about older folks.”

So he even knew about her granddad’s fall. Probably more gossip from Carol. She sighed. “Yeah. He fractured his hip. They just replaced it. I’m trying to get this place in some kind of shape before the hospital releases him.” Christina surveyed the living room. The kitchen. “He’s gonna hit the ceiling that so much stuff is gone when he gets back. I don’t know what else to do. It *has* to happen. He’s not going to be able to get around.”

“I get it,” Bill said. “So you got a plan? How you’re tackling this?”

She did. And she told him, gesturing around the room while he nodded. And there on a day when they should have both been at barbeques and getting drunk, Christina Lee Dodd and her boss—who she was no longer fucking—dug into years of pack-ratting at a rate of at least twice what she’d been going.

The dumpster got fuller. Shirts got dark under their arms. Christina had to step outside for more than one coughing fit from puffs of disturbed dust. Sometimes Bill hummed along with the radio. Dealt with spiders on her behalf.

“Hey,” she said, wiping a forearm over her brow. “You want water?”

Bill righted himself from where he was leaning over a milk crate full of god-knew-what. “Sure.”

Christina loped outside to the Bronco, where she had a mini-cooler with water bottles. There was no way she had the intestinal fortitude to see what was going on in her granddad’s fridge just yet. Let alone think about storing anything in there.

She came back and handed him the bottle. Regret followed right after. The sight of his throat moving mirrored the night at his house. When he’d shared that water with her after that time on his couch.

And now here he was.

This was work like *moving* was work. Probably worse. This was the kind of work where all your friends magically happened to be out of town that weekend, when you even mentioned what your plans were, forget asking out loud for help. Sweaty, thankless, exhausting work.

None of her cousins or aunts and uncles had ever lifted one finger. Hadn't been up here in years, like there was some void on the map where Ashland, Texas, ought to be and Grandpa Dodd just wasn't part of their reality.

Bill was here. Doing it. Asking for nothing.

Why did every damn thing have to be broken?

"Bill," she said, leaning her tailbone against the counter, "I didn't ... feel like you were taking advantage of me." When those brown eyes met hers, she swallowed. "You didn't know," she went on. "And that last time, at your house ..." Her hand made some encompassing gesture with the water bottle.

He shook his head. "It's, uh ..." Tossed his empty bottle into a nearby trash bag, and his brow pinched like his thoughts hurt. "Let's just ... let's just clean right now. Okay?"

Christina's mouth came into a line and she exhaled through her nose. "Okay."

It was not okay. But she was too drained to want to enter a struggle. They set back to it, the radio useless now as a distraction.

By the time Christina decided to call it a day, the sky was purpling past sunset. The living room looked like ... well, like a storage unit that someone was probably also trying to live in, but Pops would be able to move around in it. Was the point.

"Bill, I really appreciate it." She stood on the front porch, peeling her gloves off. Her fingertips had pruned white inside them. "This woulda taken me ... I don't know how many more nights after work."

"It's all right." He pulled off his hat and raked fingers through his hat hair. "We got it done." Then glanced over his shoulder through the door. "Well, a bunch of it done, anyway."

"Yeah." Just so awkward. "Thank you."

‘I, um ...’ Hands went into his pockets and he eyed his truck. “I should probably get home. Get Daisy fed.”

“Yeah, okay.”

They were *going* to have to talk about it at *some* point.

“All right, well. See you, uh ... see you at work tomorrow.” He met her eyes with some mustered smile.

Just not today.

“Yeah,” she said. “See you tomorrow, Bill. Thanks. Again.”

“Yup.” He was already off the porch, down the steps. “Have a good night.”

Christina just stared at the Ram as the headlights came on. As he pulled away from the house and the truck made its way out of the neighborhood.

The first of the night’s fireworks were exploding in the sky across town, from the high school stadium. Too far away to account for the boom in her chest, but she was going to blame them, anyway.



A cold, wet nose greeted Christina at the Haul Ash on Wednesday. Daisy’s tail swished in lively arcs as the mutt followed her to the time clock.

“Brought the dog today, huh?” Casual—she’d decided that morning while in the shower—would be best.

“She didn’t like the fireworks *at all*,” said Bill from the front counter stool. His eyes never left the monitor. “Idiot kids in my neighborhood are still settin’ stuff off. Thought I’d bring her in, let her be around people and calm down.”

“Probably a good idea,” said Christina. She turned and leaned down to scratch Daisy’s back. “Are you a good girl?” The tail wagging turned into whole-ass wagging. “Yes. YES!” Mouth open and tongue lolling in full dog grin. Why weren’t people this easy?

Bill stood and grabbed a set of keys from the board on the back wall. When he made for the door to the back half, it swung inward before he could go for the handle.

“ ‘Scuse me.” Jonah slid past him and headed for the bin of that day’s rental agreements to thumb through the stack.

“I’ll be out in the shop,” Bill said, and the door fell shut behind him.

Daisy stared after him for a beat, but when her new human didn’t reappear, she made a couple toenail clicking circles and flopped down at the end of the counter; a hairy endcap.

“Someone’s in a mood today,” Jonah said.

“Mm?” Christina shoved her purse under the counter and pulled the stool out to sit.

“Bill,” said Jonah, extracting what he wanted from the pile of papers. “Been a cranky-ass all morning.”

Her eyebrows made a wry twist. “That’s called ‘Bill’.”

“Nah, more than normal. I been keepin’ my head down.” Stapled paperwork in hand, Jonah headed for the front door. “Just a heads up.” The little cowbells clunked after him, a scatter of punctuation that told her nothing.

Christina logged into the scheduling software and tried with all her might to keep the thought down. Like a rambunctious puppy in a box. The thought that Bill’s mood had something to do with yesterday.

He had a life, too. All kinds of things could be going on. Not everything had to be about her.

It nagged, though.

It nagged and poked while she reviewed the schedule. It skipped around her periphery like a child needing attention while she dug into the call list.

“Hello? *Hello?*”

*Shit.*

She’d zoned out while a customer’s phone had been ringing. Hadn’t even noticed when the woman answered. “I’m sorry, hi, this is Christina from

Haul Ash Truck and Trailer, calling to confirm the car carrier you were going to pick up tomorrow?”

After that call, she slipped into the back half for her bottle of water, hoping the cold liquid would somehow wake her up. Pull her head out of this fog of ‘maybes’ and ‘what ifs’.

But water wasn’t going to be enough. Christina could tell, even as she set the bottle to the left of the keyboard and tried to focus on the damn call list again.

She needed to corner him. Today. She needed him to explain just what the fuck he expected to happen, now. They were supposed to do what? Forget any of it ever went down? Rock on their collective heels and whistle when her paycheck was half again its old size? Act like there wasn’t tension enough for tightrope walkers to be doing cartwheels all up and down the place?

Christina could work with him being an asshole. That was a known entity. This? Silence? This was impossible.

When Jonah left for the day, she was ready for the confrontation. The minute Bill came back into the office would be Go time.

She swiveled on the stool and scrolled through the list, fussing.

As soon as he came back in here.

The AC kicked on, muting some of the sounds from outside while she made herself busy.

Any minute now.

But ‘now’ turned into the rest of her shift. No Bill. Daisy let out the occasional sleeping dog groan. No more customers came in that afternoon. She could have gone out to the shop on her lunch, but the longer Christina waited, the weirder everything got. Her doubt mountain piled up high.

*Probably making ten times bigger of a deal out of this than it really is.*

The punch of her time card was the click-clack of a seat belt fastening.

*Buckle up, bitch, here we go.*

“C’mon, Daisy.”

The dog scrambled to her feet and trotted after Christina through the front door. Out toward the open roll-up door to the shop.

Bill's feet were sticking out from beneath a truck.

"Hey, Bill."

"Yeah." His voice filtered up from under tangles of metal. There was a ratcheting sound and then the clank of some tool on concrete.

"I'm gonna head out," she said. "Daisy's out here, now, with you. So you might want to keep an eye out."

"Okay."

"I didn't lock the office," she said to his boots. "In case you need back in there."

"All right."

Christina stood there, her purse hanging between her elbow and ribs. Frowning.

"Bill."

"Yeah."

Hell, it was like pulling teeth around here. "I need to talk to you."

The subtle leg movements from active work went still, and then the creeper he was lying on came rolling out from under the engine bay. Her boss pushed himself up to lean on a filthy palm. Looked at her, waiting. Christina took a breath.

"We need to sort this shit out, Bill," she said. "We can't act like nothing happened."

His face was grim. "It *is* sorted out. You needed the money in the first place, and now I'm not using you to make you get it."

"So you were using me?" she said. "Even that last night at your house?" Why was he making this fucking difficult?

He shoved the fingers of the less-dirty hand back through his hair. Closed his eyes like he had a headache. "Christina ... that doesn't excuse any of it."

"So *what*, Bill?" She made an exasperated gesture with her free hand. "People fuck up. They do weird shit. Stuff that's *wrong*. I'm not worried about two months ago. I'm talking about *now*."



Daisy circled around Christina to shove a yellow muzzle in Bill's face and start licking. He dodged but scratched at the dog's neck. Sighed with his gaze on the concrete. "I don't know ... I think you're looking for reasons why any of this is okay. It isn't."

The heat was coming into her face.

*Why? Why?*

"I'm *looking* for reasons to talk to you," she said. "I'm trying to figure out what the hell is going on. With us."

"There's nothing to talk about." He met her eyes at last, and it was like a slap. "I was an asshole. Everything needed to stop. And now it is. *That's it.*"

And now the sting was in her eyes. She was ... she was going to be stupid.

*No.*

"So *you* get to decide, huh?" Christina's knuckles were white around the handle of her purse. He was not going to see her break. "Fucking figures." She turned on her last words—spat like a curse—and strode toward the Bronco.

There was no getting out of the gravel parking lot fast enough. No avoiding the knot in her throat or the ugly shapes her mouth turned as she refused to give in to a sob. Refused to be fucking weak because of Bill Goddamned Marshall.

*I can't take it. I can't do this.*

This whole thing hurt for a reason, and Christina needed to get as far away from that reason as fast as she could.

Bill was wrong, though, if he thought he was going to decide. *She* would decide.



Christina was late.

Way late. Her shift started at nine. It was—Bill glanced at the clock—ten-thirty.

No call. Nothing. She'd never been this late and not told someone.

And he was here, holding down the front counter, because neither Jonah nor Travis were scheduled to come in that day.

*You could call her.*

No. That would make it worse, right?

All he *did* was make it worse.

He fought with the inventory software to get the week's POS ready. Something Christina normally did. She'd do this little ass-wiggle dance on the stool when she was waiting for the reports to generate, and she thought no one was looking. He'd caught her doing it just before he'd handed that documentary back to her. Touched the back of her knuckles. Breathed in her scent while he leaned over her like a lech.

It had been the right thing to do. Hadn't it? He'd been in the wrong, and he'd finally called himself on his own bullshit and put a stop to it. There was all this 'maybe, maybe, maybe', but people didn't deserve rewards for being assholes.

Tires crunched over gravel and his heart thudded in place, but when he looked up from the monitor, it wasn't her. A customer in a silver Tundra.

"Hi there," Bill said when the man pushed through the door. "What can I do for you?"

The man wanted a truck way bigger than anything the Haul Ash rented, and left frustrated and annoyed, despite Bill giving him the name of a place closer to town he might try.

"Well 'fuck you', too, pal," he grumbled after the receding pickup. *Nobody* liked anything he had to say these days, did they?

*Maybe because you're too busy being worried about what's 'right' than what it is the other person wants.*

He scowled at the computer. Didn't need any fucking life lessons from grumpy customers right then, thank you very much.

It took effort and deep breaths to drop his shoulders. What did *he* want? That was the question that needed answering in the first place. Out loud. Not avoiding it like a big shit on the carpet, hoping it'll just disappear or someone else will come along and clean it up.

*You know what you want.*

He was being an idiot. Stubborn. He *was* going to have to talk to her. She was right. It wasn't enough to acknowledge the mess. He had to get everything out in the open and just *deal* with it. Even if her response was the one thing that was twisting his anxiety into something gnarled and unrecognizable.

Hell. She was dealing with *her* problems. She was knee-deep in that fucking hoard of her granddad's, and no one was on her but herself to take on that burden.

*Coward. Just tell her.*

And, as if the brutal pep talk had been some kind of morose little overture, here came the Bronco, turning in to the lot from the highway.

He inhaled. Exhaled. Nothing slowed his pulse.

When she stepped out of her truck, it was in jeans and a tee-shirt. Why did it give him some small relief to see her that way again? How she always looked before their little 'bargain'. Before his selfish demands. This was the woman who'd made him feel this way in the first place.

She hit the door without her purse; only her keys gripped in a fist. Bulled right past him through the door to the back half, which thumped shut while his mouth was still open.

*Bad. This is bad.*

There were muted noises from the back room, and then quiet. The door whipped open and Christina now had a plastic grocery bag over one wrist, and a hoodie she kept in the back slung over her shoulder.

*Now, Asshole. Now.*

"Christina, you're right," he said. "We need to talk."

She turned on a heel and stared at him. Her brows and mouth went through a series of lines and positions, like she picked up and discarded any number of things she might say.

She was so beautiful it hurt.

"Bill, I—"

*I love you, Christina.*

Something in her eyes flared and then shut down.

“I quit.”

The bells on the front door handle clanked a lifeless goodbye.

It was a numb day. And a numb night.

He couldn't sit on his ugly couch anymore. There was a plastic chair on his back porch, and he slouched there, listening to the katydids click away in the elms in the dark.

He put the bottle of beer back down on the little glass-topped table that stood beside the chair. There were two more empty, just like it.

The fist on his left knee curled around a pair of yellow panties, cut apart at each hip. On his right, a brand new pack of Marlboros. Not opened. Yet.



Christina shouldered her way out of the gas station mini mart, her wallet and keys in one hand, and a bottle of Dr Pepper dangling from between the first two knuckles of the other. The overcast sky from a summer thunderstorm brewing to the east made the shadows under the Bronco soft and noncommittal.

“Hey!”

A voice jarred her out of autopilot and she blinked.

“Christina!”

On the opposite side of the gas pump from where she’d left her truck, Travis waved while he docked a fuel nozzle in his black Silverado. She sighed and forced a smile on her approach.

*Small town.*

“Sup, Travis.”

“How you been?”

“Eh. All right.” She opened the driver-side door and deposited keys, wallet, and soda on the front seat of her truck. “Lookin’ for a new job.”

“Yeah?” he said. “Sucks.”

“Yeah. There’s nothing decent where I don’t have to drive for twenty, thirty miles.”

This might have been the most she and Travis had ever said to each other. Maybe he was just one of those people who only relaxed outside of work.

“Lucky you got out when you did, though,” he said, watching the total on the pump flicker higher as his tank filled.

Her eyebrows went up. “Yeah, why?”

The pump housing and the adjacent support column for the canopy framed her former coworker. “Shit, Bill’s gone way back down the rabbit hole since you left.”

She shrugged, not understanding.

“Turned his prick dial way up to eleven,” Travis went on. “Probably because he’s the one who has to fuck with the schedule software now. Caught him watching a YouTube tutorial the other day.” He chuckled, and the pump shut off with a grind and *chunk*.

Christina mustered a smile. “Yeah, no doubt.”

“He’s fuckin’ *smoking* again.” Travis hung up the nozzle. Screwed his gas cap back on.

She didn’t know what to say, and just stood there, fingers curled around the door handle and body turning just enough, trying to convey her readiness to leave. After too much silence, she managed, “Well, uh ... good luck with that.” Gave a low-effort laugh.

“Right,” Travis said, turning to the door of his own truck. “Hey maybe I should put on a skirt. Maybe that’ll cheer him up!”

Her face got hot in an instant.

*He’s just making a joke. He doesn’t know.*

“Yeah,” she said, “just don’t ask for a day off.”

The Bronco door slammed after her, and she gave Travis a weak wave as she turned out of the gas station lot and back onto the highway.

Two weeks, and she had *just* stopped finding reminders around every corner to make her cry.

And for what? What *this* time? To know he was affected, too?

No. She was not going to feel bad for him. Not even one little bit. He was a grown-ass man, and he could have used his words. He’d made *his* choices, too.

*And they hurt. His choices. Mine. They were all stupid, and they all hurt.*

Pain, Christina decided, was easiest when you got the fuck away from it.

And none of this was helping her find a job.



“Saw Christina at the gas station the other day.”

“Yeah?” Bill put copious amounts of effort into keeping his face disinterested while he continued putting the shop’s main workbench back in some semblance of order.

Travis was rooting around in a box from the parts house. After no success finding whatever he was looking for inside, he picked up the whole thing and headed out through the open roll-up door to the shop. Under bright, noon sunlight, he pawed at the contents again.

“How’s she doing?” Bill said. As though a follow-up question made him seem less invested. He used the side of his hand to sweep little odds and ends into a pile on the work surface. Cut bits of wiring. Twisty ties from packaging already opened.

“Eh.” Travis came up at last with something tiny in a plastic bag from the parts box and shrugged. “All right, I guess.” He returned through the door into the shade of the shop. Started tearing into the little bag. “Said she’s lookin’ for a job, still. Seemed like she wanted to get the hell out of there, though. Kinda weird.”

“Oh?” Bill scooped the little pile into his other palm. Transferred it to the trash bin.

“Yeah, I dunno. I don’t remember her bein’ that antisocial.”

Bill grunted at this. “Hey, put that little bag in the trash,” he said to Travis, when he saw his employee about to start cluttering up the workbench again. “Tryna keep this area where we can find things.”

And that was the period on the conversation about Christina.

*She’d* been smart. *She’d* quit. She didn’t have to walk around here all day looking at the workbench. Where he’d touched her. Seen her. The chair outside behind the office. The bathroom.

*Fuck.*

He’d done this to himself.

*She's the one who quit. You were ready to talk. To tell her. She's the one who stormed out of here.*

After he'd made things as difficult as possible, of course.

Bill began picking up boxes that littered the workbench—oil filters, spark plugs, and the like—to see which were empty and could be tossed.

He could make whatever excuses he wanted. This was his grave, and he'd dug it. He hadn't deserved Christina Lee Dodd six months ago, and he didn't deserve her now.



The guest bedroom at her granddad's house hadn't been touched in even longer than the living room, and Christina made a conscious effort to avoid wishing Bill were there to help her with the hoard again. This had been her dad's room, growing up. It was about to be hers.

She was cringing and attacking the upper reaches of the inside of the closet with the tube attachment of a vacuum cleaner, making herself tiny and hoping none of the spiderwebs to which she was laying waste had any active inhabitants, when her clunking of the tube made a small box tumble to the ground.

Christina shrieked and leaped back. Her anxiety was at a level.

Bits of paper inside came fluttering out on the way down, and more splayed themselves on the floor space she'd cleared like a messy deck of cards. She switched off the vacuum.

"What're you doin' in there?" Her granddad's voice came from the recliner she'd convinced him to make his way to in the living room.

"I'm makin' a mess," she hollered back. Silence told her this was a satisfying response.

Christina squatted on her heels and righted the little box. A cigar box with a hinged lid. The paper things were notes. Yellowed postcards. Envelopes that were intensely sharp and flat, in the way of old papers that had been stored, compressed, for long years.



She turned over a stiff white rectangle to find a photo of her grandma and granddad. Maybe from the early 60s, judging by her grandma's hair? It was for sure from before when her dad was born; he'd been a late-in-life baby for her grandparents, and this was in front of some house she didn't know. Pops and Nana were both smiling in the picture, even as they squinted into the sun.

Photo set aside again in the box, Christina thumbed open one of the folded notes on the floor. In that nearly identical cursive that all older folks born around the same era seemed to have, she began to make out in faded ink the beginnings of a letter from her granddad to her grandma. After a few lines, she folded the paper and returned it to the box—it was personal, and not hers to see.

The hoarding had really started after her grandma had passed.

She gathered the rest of the spilled mementos back into their container and stood. Made her way out into the living room.

"Hey, Pops," she said. "Look what I found."

"What's that?" He eyed the box.

"Look." She handed it to him, and he took it and set it in his lap. Selected the note she'd seen to open and inspect.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, once he got a handle on what she'd brought him. "I haven't seen these in years. Where'd you find these?"

"Closet in Dad's old room." Christina refrained from pointing out that things wouldn't go missing for so long if he kept the hoard under control. Saying stuff like that didn't help.

She let him be to sift through memories without her hovering and returned to the bedroom to work. Her trailer was already on the market and, once she sold it, she could live with her granddad and avoid having to pay space rent at Ashland Estates while she continued to hunt for a new job. Pops had agreed readily to the idea—he'd never liked the idea of her living alone—and there was no way she could keep Denise on to help him out now that she'd reduced her income by one hundred percent.

Just needed to find a job. Before her savings ran out and things got *really* shitty.

*You had a job. Your stubborn ass just had to have the last word.*

Making her dogged way through more boxes and piles in the closet did a good enough job of distracting her until her stomach decided to have a say.

“I’m gonna make us some sandwiches, Pops,” she said as she came back into the main part of the the house.

“What’s that?”

“I said, I’m gonna make us some food.” Christina went to where she’d set her cooler on the kitchen counter and started lifting out the sandwich fixings she’d brought. The kitchen was still in no state to cook in—cleaning in there would come after the bedroom.

A few minutes later, she had paper plates bearing ham sandwiches to share with her granddad. The TV tray alongside his recliner was their table for the afternoon—he still wasn’t moving from place to place if he didn’t have to after the hip surgery. She’d have to get better about convincing him to try walking around a little every day.

While her granddad worked his way through the triangle of meat and bread, Christina eyed the open cigar box, still on his lap.

“Pops,” she said around a mouthful, “how did you know you were in love with Nana?”

“Mm?”

She repeated herself. At least once was normal.

“Oh?” he said, thumbing the same photo she’d found in the other room. “Hell, I don’t know.”

Christina hid her eye roll behind a smile and chewing. Always seemed like everything was easier in those days. It wasn’t. But it sure looked like it. Like things just happened and nobody had any idea *how* they’d happened.

“Well, maybe,” her granddad said, after picking up the picture and squinting at it for a time, crust of a sandwich still in his other hand, “maybe ...” He frowned, and she waited.

“You know,” he said, “there was a time your grandmother went off to take care of her great Uncle Harv for a bit? Oh, maybe six months?”

“I did *not* know that.” She tried to encourage him; not just for her own sake, but because her granddad was happier when he could tell his stories.

“He’d done this same thing I did,” Pops went on. “Fell and bust a hip. This was before we were married.”

Christina nodded, and he continued.

“By the time she was gone a couple weeks? Hell. Missed her so much, I liked to *died*. And she was all the way in Missourah.”

She smirked at the way her granddad always pronounced ‘Missouri’. “What’d you do, Pops?”

It was like he hadn’t heard her. “This was in nineteeeen ... forty-nine? Fifty? No, forty-nine.” He brandished the crust, arguing with himself before meeting her eyes again. “It don’t matter. You best believe I had a ring bought by the time she come back. I couldn’t be without her. All there was to it.”

“But how’d you *know* you couldn’t be without her?” Egging him on was fun. Good to see him lively. And focused on something other than actively trying to fill his house with junk.

“Oh, I suppose ... every damn thing around reminded me of her. Couldn’t go see a picture show with the boys, and I didn’t think of our first date at the theater. Or help Mama bring in the groceries, and I’d see your grandma in my head. The first time she come over and helped Mama cook, and then we’d sneak off after supper and go neck.” The old man’s eyes glinted at the memory, and he gave Christina a wink. “But I didn’t tell you none of that.”

“Can’t imagine why, Pops.” She returned a crooked smile.

“Why you wanna know all this?” he asked, cocking her a suspicious eye. “You makin’ eyes at a boy?”

*Christ, Pops. If you only knew.*

“I’m just bein’ nosy,” she said, gathering up the paper plates. “You wanna play some cards before I go back to cleaning in there?”

“Sure,” he said to her back as she moved to one of the trash bags under the kitchen counter. “You try not to cheat this time.”

“You’re the one who cheats, Pops! I see you ‘accidentally’ bumpin’ the cards when you don’t think I’m lookin’!”

She went and fished the deck of cards out of her purse. Her and her granddad bickered, friendly, and Christina tried not to leave space in her head for one William James Marshall.



## chapter 15

It had been three months and six days since Christina had quit her job at the Haul Ash. Not that she'd been keeping track.

The trailer had sold after escrow had taken for-fucking-ever, and tomorrow she was going to make a final sweep of the place, the first big adult purchase she'd ever made about to be another thing at which she'd failed, and get the last of her stuff out. Possibly clean some things, because *that* never ended.

She was wiping crumbs off a countertop that very minute. Her granddad's kitchen was clean all around her. As clean as it had been in decades, thanks to her vigilance.

And now it smelled like warm, baked things. A thousand times better. Her granddad was walking around more every day, though she had to keep on her toes to curtail his bringing more things into the house.

Christina laid the cookies atop a paper towel inside the plastic container she'd set aside on the counter. They were gingerbread, and it was only October, but it was the only one of her nana's recipes she'd ever been able to not screw up on a consistent basis. Her 'go to' for any sort of situation where people expected her to show up with food.

She'd let it fester. The whole three months. There were times where 'forget and move on' was her sole objective. More often, 'dwell and wallow' stamped her other goals right out.

Today was the day.

Christina pressed the container lid down on all four corners and hefted the thing. Came around the counter to collect her purse.

Her granddad was watching a war documentary on the TV in the living room.

“I’ll be back later this afternoon, Pops.” She stopped beside his chair to get his attention. “You call my phone if you need something.”

He dragged his eyes from the screen. “Where you goin’?”

“Gonna go take these cookies to some friends.”

“And you aren’t gonna leave *me* any?” He twisted his face in mock affront, and Christina smiled.

“There’s more in the kitchen,” she said. “We’ll have some after supper.”

“All right.” Her granddad turned back to his show. “Have fun.”

*Fun. Right.*

The Bronco fired up and pulled away from the curb.

Today was the last chance she was giving this whole thing. Why she’d made cookies for it, she didn’t entirely understand. Some kind of peace offering? A way to open dialogue?

*Fuck me, I hate this.*

The whole thing made her skin itch.

Ashland was too small. Too small to avoid running into Travis at the gas station. Too small to find a decent job anywhere close. And too small to give her a reasonable amount of emotional prep time on her drive to the Haul Ash.

The rental yard’s sign out by the highway appeared in Christina’s view well before she was ready. She flat-out drove right past it the first time and had to convince herself to turn around and not just keep driving, straight on out the other end of town.

The needle of her weirdness meter was jumping around wildly in the red when she made that long-familiar turn from pavement to gravel lot. The two steel buildings were exactly as they had been, but the sense of *difference* after her time away was uncanny. Like she was coming here in a dream and not grabbing the container of cookies in her very real hand. Stepping out of the Bronco onto very real ground.

They’d see her through the glass as her truck rolled-up. See her coming toward the door. Would they start talking? Speculating? Some force propelled her feet forward.

*This is it. He's either going to hear you out, or not. Whatever's going to happen, it's happening now.*

Her heart was trying to swallow itself in uneven hiccups. Through the door she went, cowbells tinkling, grip on baked goods intense.

Jonah looked up from the computer. Raised eyebrows greeted her just ahead of his mouth. "Hey, Christina," he said. "Dang, been a while!"

"Hey, Jonah." She hoped the awkward line on her face looked something like a smile.

"What's going on?" He stapled a credit card receipt to an invoice. "Find a new job yet?"

"Ugh. No." Because, of course, he had to rub salt in it. "Just comin' to say 'hi'. I brought these. Same kind as I made last winter."

She hefted the container and slid it onto the counter, cracking the lid open on one corner as she did.

"Oh, nice! Can I have one?"

"That's what I brought 'em for," she said. "Hey, is Bill here?"

*So casual. So smooth. Yeesh.*

"Uh-uh," Jonah said through gingerbread. "He's off Thursday-Friday, now. So he can be here on Monday to do the pos."

Christina struggled to control her face. How had she not noticed that his truck wasn't out front?

*Because you're blind, dumbass. This whole thing has you blind.*

Today was the day.

Anything that was going to happen was going to happen *now*. And it had. The universe could not be more obvious about it.

Jonah had stopped chewing, his hand on the way back to the container for seconds. "Wait," he said, eyeing her, "were you bringing these ... for Bill?"

It welled up. All of it. The look on Jonah's face. The key rack behind him on the wall. The empty hum of the AC. Wilted flowers on a grave marker and there was nothing really left anymore, was there? Who was she fucking kidding? It welled and overflowed.

“You know what?” she said, holding the two ends of her voice together with all her might, “It doesn’t even matter. Just take ‘em.”

If he said anything to her retreating back, the sound of the door and the bells clattered right over it.

*Let it go.*

She hustled into the Bronco. Fought the seatbelt while her eyes stung, yanking it one, two, three times while she tried not to scream.

*Just stop. It’s over.*

Tires bumped up onto the blacktop. She blinked away blurry vision and put more than her normal amount of focus into watching her speed.

This was real life. Real life where there were cops just waiting to hand out tickets she couldn’t afford. Real life where people didn’t always get what they wanted. Not some fairytale where kisses lift curses and everyone’s happy.

She needed to live her real life. Not a fantasy one.

*But I ...*

*I think I ...*

No. No saying it. No thinking it.

No more.



Bill’s beaten-up copy of *Dune* sat on his nightstand, its receipt bookmark halted in place since July. It throbbed in his periphery as he sat on the edge of the bed and tugged on shoes and socks, the reminder trying to ruin another mercifully bland October morning.

If he tried to read it, she was sitting in his lap again. He could smell her. Feel her.

Until all that went away, House Atreides could just sit there.

He grabbed up his wallet and keys from the narrow table that stood behind his new couch. Daisy was already in the backyard. Nicotine patch



on his arm, but he'd see if he could make it through the day. He seldom did.

Today was going to be insane. He'd seen the call list during the week; damn near every rentable piece of equipment was either coming or going off the lot. If either Jonah or Travis called out, he was going to lose his shit.

*You could take a look at some of those applicants. Fill some of those hours.*

Bill *could* do a lot of things.

The sky was that almost-white overcast as he pulled into the Haul Ash lot. The kind of sky that was procrastinating about either raining or clearing up, it wasn't sure which. The office wasn't open yet, but—thank heaven for small favors—both Jonah and Travis were already parked out front.

One of the shop's two roll-up doors was open, and Bill headed there instead of the office, giving Jonah a brisk wave through the glass on his way past the front windows.

"Bill." Travis nodded at him from the open driver's side window of the twelve-footer he was pulling out of the shop.

"Morning."

Gravel crunched behind him, and Bill turned to see a customer pulling in. He shook his head. Nearly twenty minutes before their posted hours, but signs on the front door would be useless with the shop clearly opened and employees walking around. Jonah would handle it.

There was maintenance work, and that was where Bill intended to shove his nose until lunch. Or until someone wanted a manager, which was a safe bet on a day scheduled as tight as that one.

When the shop phone rang just after noon, the disgruntled customer beat out food in the neck-and-neck race. Bill handled it. In his way. Which was to say, that customer was unlikely to recommend the Haul Ash to his friends and family.

"Damn, son," Jonah said watching the man's SUV leave the lot.

"Well then he should read things," said Bill. "It says right in the rental agreement. Right where he signed."

His employee snorted. Picked up and hefted a smallish, translucent container in his boss's direction. "Want a cookie?"

Bill lifted a brow but took the thing. Started prying up the lid. “Where’d these come from?”

And then the smell hit him.

“Christina was in here yesterday,” Jonah said, eyes on the monitor again, mouse hand scrolling. “She brought ‘em. I think she was actually lookin’ for you, but I told her you got Fridays off, now.”

Gingerbread.

How long did he stand there, a deer in headlights, before he looked up to find Jonah giving him the concerned stare.

“Somethin’ we should know?”

Bill’s mouth was dry. He set down the container. “Don’t worry about it.”

But Jonah was all over it, eyes round. “Wooooow.” The kid had it in his teeth, like a dog shaking a rag, enthusiasm building. “You and *Christina*? Holy *shit*.” And then, after a beat in which Bill wanted to strangle him: “Hey, is that why she left?” Clumsy feet stomped all over a fortress Bill had built of mismatched twigs of normalcy.

“I *said*, just”—he growled through his teeth—“you know what?”

“Uh ... no, I don’t?” Jonah’s eyebrows sought their own levels of atmosphere.

“Goddamnit.”

Bill reached past him to tear one of the rings of truck keys off the rack on the back wall. He was already de-threading the tag and the key as he strode through the front door and toward the Ram, blood singing in his ears.



Christina stood in her old bedroom in the trailer, empty of everything except the bare mattress, which she wasn’t quite sure how to move or transport on her own, and stretched an orange-and-white skirt between her hands.

It was one of the ones she’d bought for Bill, and they were the last things hanging in the closet.

*Keep ‘em or toss ‘em?*

They were perfectly viable skirts. She didn’t have the money to go throwing out decent clothes. But outside of that ‘bargain’, when had she ever worn skirts? And when would she ever want to wear *these* skirts again?

She sighed, but it was a noise contained in her throat, and stuffed the garment into the trash bag at her feet. Pulled the next one from its hanger and stuffed it, too. Kept going. It wasn’t a decision yet; she transported all her clothes in trash bags to begin with, because having squishy belongings gave her more options for packing the Bronco.

Christina hefted that and another bag full of sheets and blankets, and waddled her way through the trailer. She gave the squinty eye to some markings now visible on the front living room wall where her little sofa had been. There were cleaning supplies out in the truck. She could get them once she wedged these bags in there.

Navigating the narrow steps down from her front door was a chore with the bulk, and Christina swore when one of the metal curlicues on the banister caught and tore the bag with the blankets.

“For fuck’s sakes.”

*But you’re almost done. Don’t stop.*

The truck’s hatch and tailgate yawned open like a mouth. Bags and boxes were already wedged in there, a complicated puzzle. Plenty of it was for donation—her granddad had all the furniture she needed, and there was no point doing the very thing she kept on him about: bringing more stuff into the house.

She found places to cram in the last two bags, and then went around to the passenger side where she’d left her little bin of rags and cleaning stuff. Head ducked into the open door, she began to rummage for one of those white spongy erasers that pretty much cleaned everything.

There were tires gritting on dirt. An engine cutting out and a door *chunking* shut.

“Christina.”

Her head shot up and she nailed it on the door frame. “Fuck!” Fingers whipped to back of her skull as she stepped away from the Bronco.

“Jesus Christ, Bill!”

There he was, causing her even more pain. He’d stopped in his tracks, several feet away, under the awning of her trailer to stare at her. Concern pinched his face.

“Are you all right?”

There was no collecting her shit. Why? What now? “I mean ... ugh, I guess?” She quit rubbing her head and eyed him, one foot further back, like she might bolt.

“Listen,” he said, and she wanted to do everything *but* listen, but he took a step in her direction. “The agreement is off, right?”

Something jerked around under her ribs.

*Can’t take it.*

“Uh, obviously,” she said, looking him up and down like he’d sprouted horns. “I don’t work for you anymore.”

He took the last long stride.

“Good.”

Hands were on her. Heels pivoted, and the side of the truck was at her back.

Bill Marshall’s mouth was on hers.

Christina yelped some nonsense, but it fell apart when he ate it right out from under her tongue. Her *world* fell apart. Nothing between her ears caught up fast enough to try to argue or kiss back or beat him to death.

He pulled back. Destroyed her with those brown eyes. “I need you.” Crowded her.

“Bill!”

Jarred her into another plane of reality with a second kiss. A tiny thing in her chest shuddered. She tilted her chin. Let him, even when her head fought it.

*You tried so goddamn hard not to do this.*

He came up for air. "I haven't seen you in *months*."

"*Bill!*"

His hands clasped the sides of her face. She met him this time, tongue and teeth, furious.

So good. So right. How fucking *dare* he?

Her fingers were lacing around the back of his neck, and she tasted him and wanted him, and was so entirely pissed off that she let their thighs dovetail and his tongue spell out whole volumes before she pushed him off.

"What even *is* this?" She was raking hair out of her face, lips swollen, breathless. His body still pinned her to the Bronco. A woman had stuck her head out the front door of the neighboring trailer, brow pinched at the unfolding scene.

"You made cookies."

How had he made those words stroke her like something much heavier?

"*And?*" She squirmed. "You just show up here and start making out with me in front of my neighbors? What the fuck is your *deal*?"

"You." He lunged at her with the word. Kissed her again. "*You* are my deal. I'm a wretched sonovabitch without you, Christina Lee Dodd, and if you don't marry me, I don't know *what* the fuck I'm gonna do."

"*What?*" Her grip on sanity fluttered. She clutched at his arms, as though the truck wouldn't hold her up. "Are you outta your goddamn *mind*, Bill?" A knot was in her throat.

"Yes." He was taking a knee. Right there in front of her empty trailer. "Yes I am. I am out of my mind in love with you, and I have been since before last Christmas."

All her systems were shutting down. He was digging in a front pocket of his jeans, and she was blinking too fast.

*Last Christmas?*

Between thumb and forefinger, he was pinching something shiny. Silver.

*Is that a keyring?*

Grabbing up her left hand.

“Will you *please* marry me?” he said, grip on her knuckles fierce. “I know what I am, Christina. I know I’m a prick. I know what everyone calls me. I know I’m too old for y—”

“Oh my god, *shut up*, you fucking asshole!” Her voice warbled by the end of her outburst.

She’d settled right down into it. Sometime in the last two years. Not even noticing until foolish choices painted her into a corner.

She couldn’t be without him. It was all there was to it.

His brows condensed. “Christina—”

“Yes! Yes, I will marry you!” She wanted to laugh and cry at once. “Jesus *Christ*, are you a dick, though! Get up here.”

He was threading the makeshift ring onto her finger. She was making a fist in his work shirt. They were kissing again.

The ring way too huge, and it would be work to hang onto it, much like everything else at the moment, but Christina didn’t care.

“I missed you,” he said, once they fell away breathless. “I never want to miss you like that again.”

“Hey! All right! Congratulations!” Her neighbor was clapping.

Christina felt her face go hot, but she still had him by the shirt. His eyes were swallowing her. Eclipsing the rest of the world. She stood on her toes. Leaned up to brush her lips over his, dizzy from a reality where she could do a thing like that at any time she wanted. Where she *did* want a thing like that.

More than her face was warm.

“I’ve been missing you, too, Bill.” These words were quiet, hummed near his mouth and *not* for the neighbors.

The look on his face was like that afternoon in the shop. While he stood there and watched. Forced himself not to get involved, though she saw it took every bit of his effort.

Christina shoved him back. Grabbed up his hand. Hauled him up the three little stairs, through the door into an empty living room that felt in the moment weirdly hot and close.

They were making up for all the kissing they'd missed. Her shirt was on the carpet. His was on the kitchen linoleum. They stumbled backward, breath hissing in the silence, names mumbled into each other's mouths.

She was laughing when the backs of her knees hit the mattress. Grinning when he crawled over her. Her wrist twisted behind her back, and then her bra was across the room. The heat of his chest lowered onto hers.

*"Oh, god."*

And that mouth. The one place it was always meant to be, telling her all those things without words that Christina had always been waiting to hear. She just hadn't understood who she'd wanted to hear them *from*.

Her left foot was kicking the shoe off her right. There was too much momentum. He was chuckling, shucking her jeans down past her hips, yanking the right pant leg off past her foot. Too much pain to erase with happy things. She tore at the buttons of his fly; found him ready. On fire.

He was between her legs. Above her. The urgency so great it made a lump in her throat. Whatever he saw on her face made him dive for her mouth again, and they fell, kisses reckless, bodies rolling as though they might only be satisfied if they occupied one hundred percent of the same space.

There were knuckles bumping her inner thighs. Firm heat between them. Seating. Hiding from it was over; this thing she hadn't wanted to look right in the eye.

Her palms splayed on his chest. She looked him in the eye now.

*"I love you, Bill Marshall."*

They were together. She accepted him, and he made her full. Her breath shuddered. Nails dug. He sank down until their lips met.

*"Again."*

She about turned inside out. *"I love you."*

A low noise came from his throat, and a palm cupped the back of her neck. *"I'm yours, Christina Lee. I love you."*

And she was his. Right there in her empty trailer, where half the neighbors could probably hear.

Christina did not care.

She was in love.





Christina yawned from behind the counter of the Haul Ash, and gave her cup of coffee the side eye—it was doing nothing, but she took another sip. She was pretty sure she'd *dreamed* about Qualitative Social Research last night; the class reading had her up until three.

*You gotta pace yourself, Dodd.*

Her eyes watered, and she wiped at them. Stretched her arms out behind her back. She'd woken up that morning all stiff and wadded up on the couch. Bill had come out and stuffed a blanket in around her some point in the wee hours, and put her book and laptop on the coffee table, out of harm's—and probably drool's—way.

*Nothing* saved *her* from drool. Or wet noses. Not at seven in the morning when Daisy wanted to go out. Like Christina was the only tall monkey in that house who knew how to open doors.

The phone rang, and it was too early.

“Thank you for calling Haul Ash Truck and Trailer, this is Christina, how may I help you?”

She held the receiver away from her ear. The coffee was clearly working for this person. Who was not happy. And promising to come down there in person.

She'd no sooner finished *that* call with a shake of her head, than her own phone was vibrating from the countertop next to the keyboard. Text from Denise.

*God, here we go ...*

She thumbed her phone open and braced.

*We went 2 grocery store. He didn't try 2 buy even 1 thing that wasn't food! :) :) :)*

Her shoulders fell, and Christina blew out a breath. Not just ‘not bad’ news, but pretty decent news. She and Denise were trying so hard with Pops. Some days it was good. Other days? She made a face. Some days were good, though, and that was what mattered.

It was just past ten when a white dually rolled onto the lot. Probably the ‘fun’ individual she’d been waiting for.

A man in a blue ball cap bearing some kind of company logo stepped out and headed toward the office. Pushed open the front door and the February chill whorled in behind him.

“Hi there,” she said, neutral.

“You the gal I talked to on the phone earlier?” He hitched his belt on both sides as he approached the counter.

*Yup. Fun.*

“That’d be me.”

“I’m gonna need to talk to your manager.”

Her hand was reaching for the phone when the door to the back half bumped open.

“I’m the owner,” said Bill. “What’s going on?”

Sometimes Christina swore he just stood around back there, waiting to pounce on these people. Sometimes that was okay with her.

The customer switched his attention to Bill. “This here employee of yours put an unauthorized charge on my credit card.”

Bill cut an eye to Christina. “This the truck that came back dirty?”

“It’s the sixteen-footer, yeah.”

“Sir, that’s not an ‘unauthorized charge’,” Bill said. “Rental contract says you bring it back clean. That truck came back lookin’ like someone had a whole cattle drive right through the cab.”

The man’s mouth twisted, skeptical. “You had to run a vacuum. How’s’at cost twenty-five dollars?”

Christina picked at her thumbnail. These debates were always pleasant.

“I have to put it out of service,” said Bill, “and pay my guys while they clean it all out. Doesn’t matter the ‘why’ or ‘how’—it comes back dirty, we

charge your card.”

“It was raining!” Blue Ball Cap flung a hand in the air. “Whaddya want me to do? Hose it out?”

“Sure,” said Bill. “Yeah. Whatever you need to do. I know that’s not how we gave that truck to you, though.”

The guy eyed her fiancé up and down. “This is bullshit,” he said. “I’m gonna dispute the charge with my credit card.”

Bill snorted. “Yeah? Good luck with that. Credit card companies love people who go against service agreements.”

“Ridiculous,” the man muttered, along with an assortment of profanity as he shouldered his way back outside. Slammed his truck door and drove off.

Christina shook her head. Tried to hold down a guilty grin. “You’re such an asshole, Bill.” She slid over and rubbed a palm across his lower back. “But you’re mine.”

He turned. Arms were around her waist. His chin on her shoulder from behind. “You keep calling me that,” he said near her ear, “I’m gonna make you start wearing skirts again.”

“What?” She twisted her neck to look at him. “ ‘Asshole’, or ‘mine’?”

Brown eyes glittered with trouble for later that night. “Hmm. I don’t know yet.” He nipped at her earlobe.

“You’re not gonna make me do *shit*, Bill Marshall.”

His grip tightened around her ribs. Voice dropped to that place that made her feel all sorts of ways. “The fuck I ain’t, Christina Lee.”

“Hey!” Travis barked, popping in through the back half door. “Other people are tryna work, here.”

Bill let her go, but her skin still prickled.

They had taken a wrong turn back there somewhere, but it had brought them to the right place. And that was all that mattered.

**Thanks for reading *Bass-Ackwards*!**

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Eris writes dark, escape-from-reality romance full of criminals and outcasts. Her stories are the stomping grounds for bada\*\* heroines, untameable alphas, a spectrum of sexuality, and a serious disregard for convention. Expect the decadent and filthy, the crude and sublime, sometimes all at once. Pick a safeword and grab a towel before reading. She is a complete nerd and possible crazy cat lady. She will annoy you with puns.

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